

# RESPONSE TO COVID-19 AT UTS

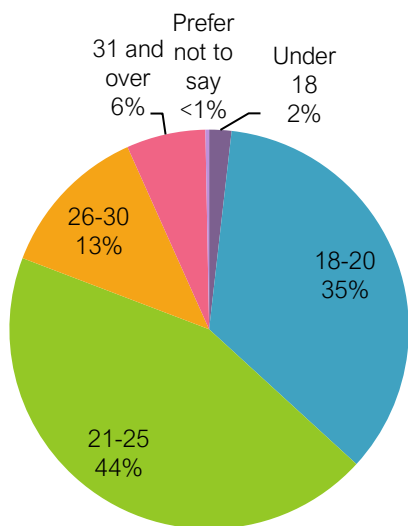
791 students took part in this survey which was circulated via email and Facebook in April 2020. This report highlights and summarises how COVID-19 has affected students' lives.

If you would like a more detailed summary please contact [secretary@utsstudentsassociation.org](mailto:secretary@utsstudentsassociation.org)

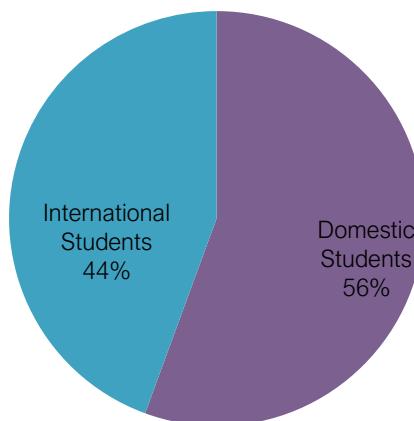
Content Warning: Mental health

## Demographics

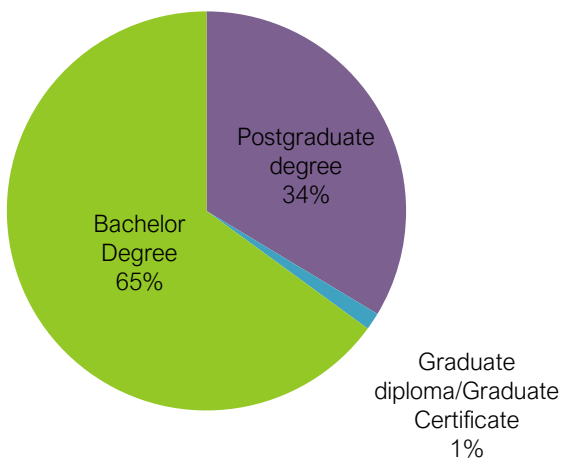
Age



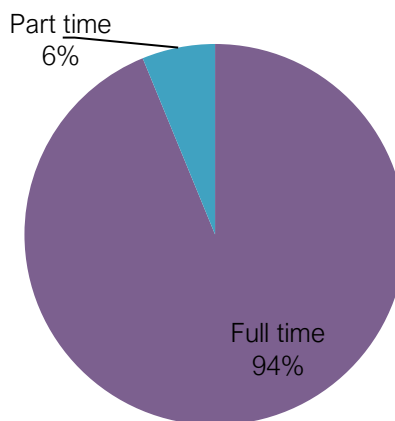
Domestic or International



Highest level of study



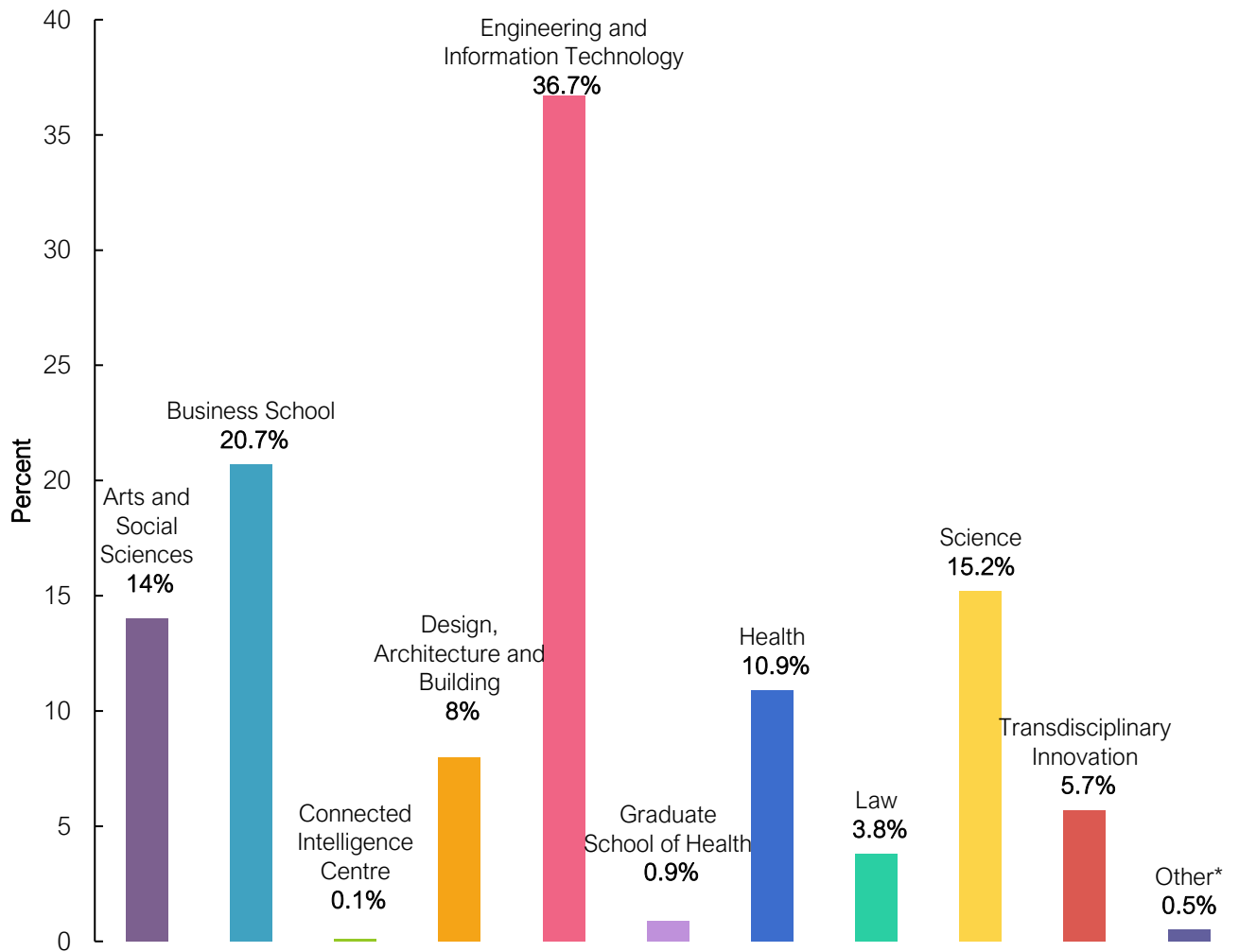
Part time or full time



Course breakdown

26% of respondents were in their **first** year

39% of respondents were in their **final** year



\*Other: MAPS, International Studies, Education, Diploma in Language

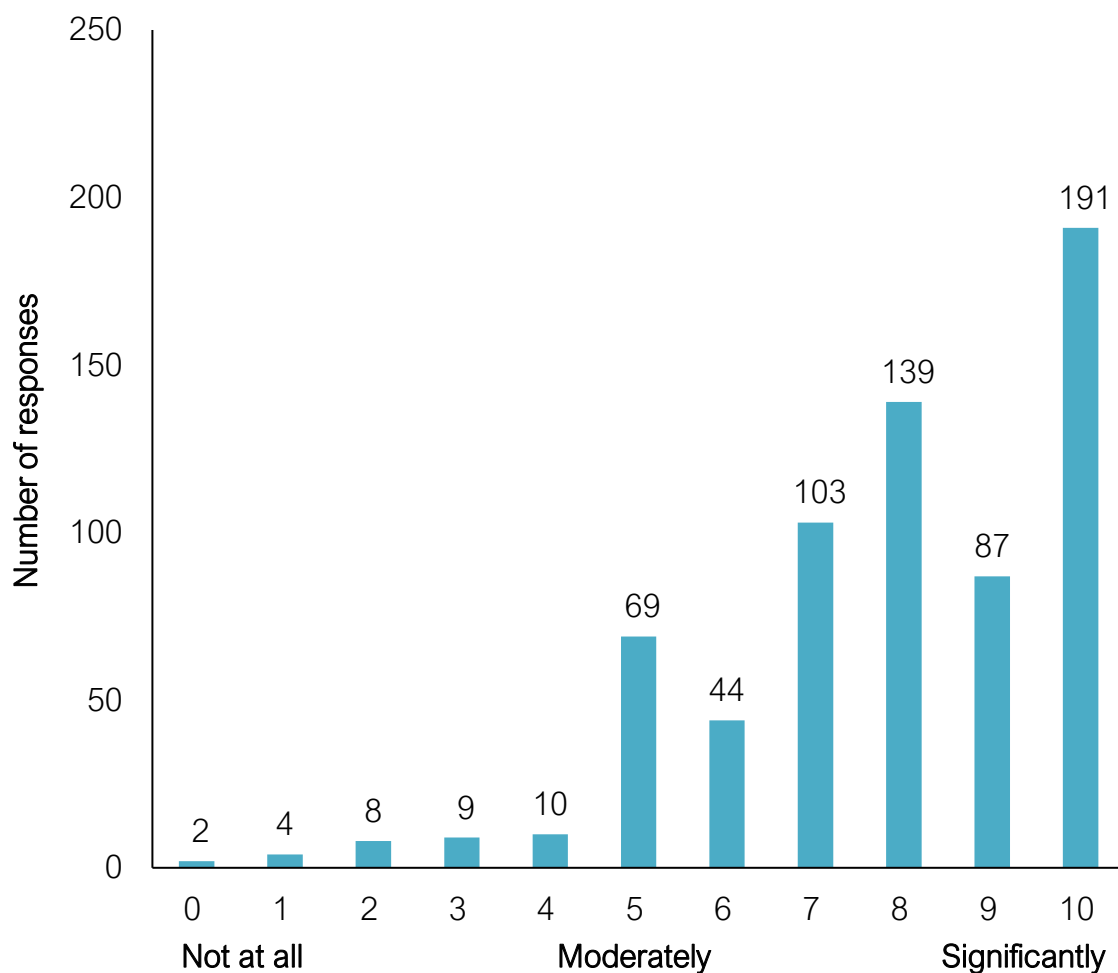
We asked students, “How much has COVID-19 disrupted you as a student?” and asked them to indicate the disruption on a scale of 0-10 (0 being not at all and 10 being significantly)

The mean response for **all** students = **7.84**

The mean response for **International** Students = **8.19**

The mean response for **Domestic** Students = **7.55**

COVID-19 has clearly significantly disrupted the life of almost all students. However, the difference between the disruption for International and Domestic students is **statistically significant** ( $p < 0.001$ ).



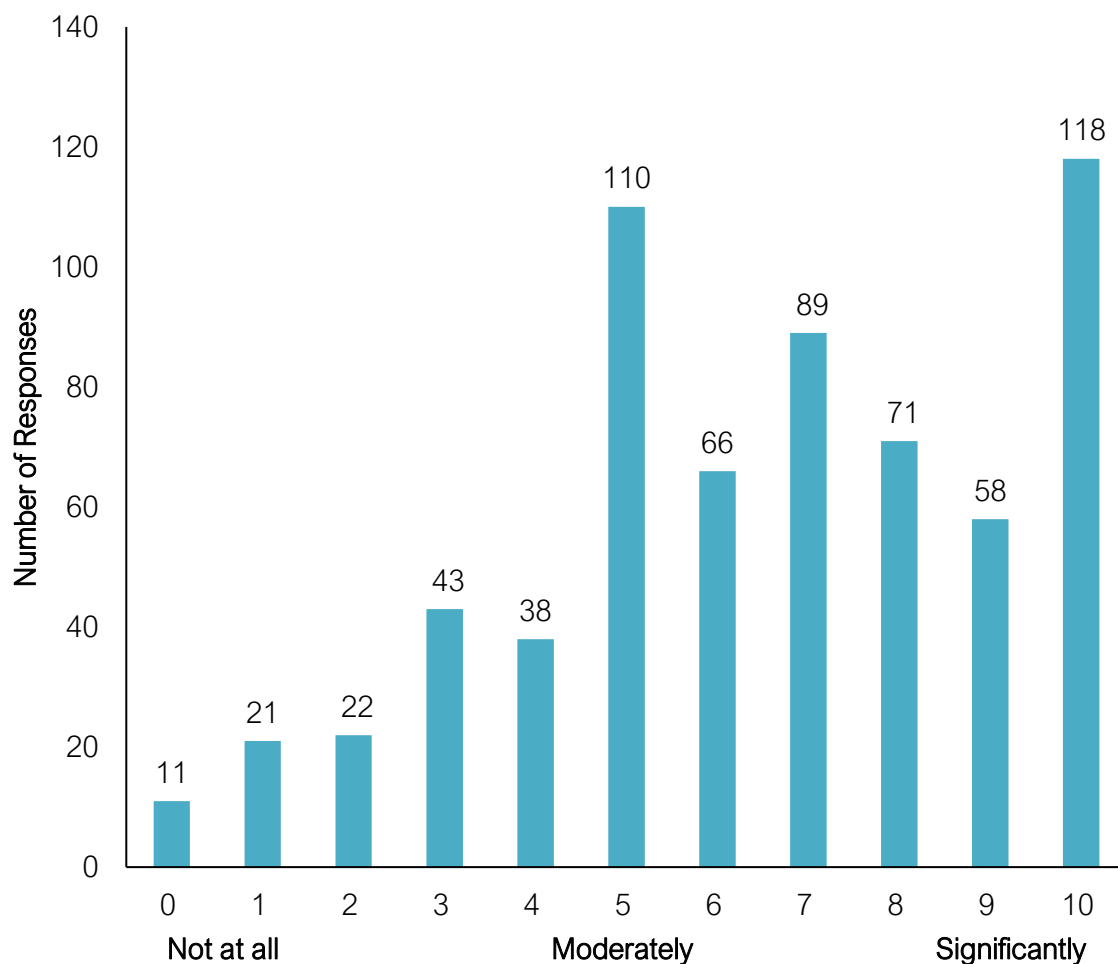
We then asked, *“How much has COVID-19 affected your mental health?”* and asked students to again indicate the disruption on a scale of 0-10 (0 being not at all and 10 being significantly)

The mean response for **all** students = **6.47**

The mean response for **International** Students = **6.78**

The mean response for **Domestic** Students = **6.20**

Students' mental health has clearly been affected. Once again, the difference between the disruption to student lives for International and Domestic students is **statistically significant** ( $p=0.005$ ).



Students were asked to scale how they feel certain aspects of life have been affected by COVID-19.

Aspects of student life affected by COVID-19 were then ranked based on how many students agreed with the statement. "COVID-19 HAS AFFECTED MY..."

Options were: agree, somewhat agree, somewhat disagree, disagree or not applicable/prefer not to say

	% of students that responded "agree"
<i>Peer interactions</i>	83%
<i>Interactive classes other than labs (tutorials, workshop etc)</i>	76%
<i>Engagement with learning</i>	73%
<i>Library</i>	71%
<i>Student services (e.g. gym, food court)</i>	70%
<i>Financials</i>	64%
<i>Lab classes/lab work</i>	63%
<i>Other assessments</i>	61%
<i>Exams</i>	55%
<i>Lecture recordings</i>	36%
<i>IT access– WiFi, Computer access</i>	35.0%
<i>Health services</i>	35%
<i>Counselling services</i>	33%
<i>Housing</i>	33%
<i>Centrelink/welfare payments</i>	26%
<i>Legal services</i>	22%

## Details of disruption of student life

Students were asked to give details as to how their student life has been disrupted. These responses were varied. However, there were certain phrases and themes that occurred many times which have been detailed below. The UTS Students' Association Executive has read and considered all the submitted responses. Not all issues and complaints are mentioned below.

### IMPACT ON INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- Unable to afford necessities
- Large upfront costs unable to be put on HECs
- Unable to engage with many of the reasons students chose to come to Australia
- Mental health impacts
- Mentions of not feeling safe in Australia
- Dependence on NGOs
- Significant feeling of loneliness (in home country and Australia)
- Job loss
- Stress about family/friends in home country (i.e. if in a severely affected area)
- Large airfare costs

### IMPACT ON MENTAL HEALTH

- Overwhelming number of students becoming more anxious and more depressed
- Impacts were felt by students who
  - Had pre-existing mental health issues and COVID-19 has worsened the issues
  - Never previously have had mental health issues
  - Have had mental health issues in the past, these issues improved, then COVID-19 has made them worse
- Mental health intrinsically linked with many other impacts mentioned
- More difficulties accessing necessary support

### FINANCIAL ISSUES AND COMPLAINTS ABOUT FEES

- Many students lost their jobs
  - By contrast, some students under pressure to work more (health care workers)
- Inability of students to pay rent and necessities
- Complaints about fees and tuition (particularly as students feel they aren't receiving what fees and tuition covers in a regular semester)
- Being concerned about money is detrimental to academic performance
- Students whose work arrangements changed after census date disadvantaged

### DIFFICULTIES WITH ONLINE LEARNING

- Complaints about online learning was the most mentioned issue by students.
- While understanding of the inevitability of transitioning to online classes was, students often didn't feel teachers were utilising the tools to their best advantage
- Students unable to get the same amount of help from staff as they do in person
- Classes have been shortened meaning they are skimmed through. Therefore, it is more difficult for students to understand content
- Extremely difficult for students with certain disabilities. Needs are not being met
- Numerous technical difficulties reported

## DIFFICULTIES STAYING FOCUSED AND MOTIVATED

- Impacts were felt by students with and without pre-existing concentration issues (such as ADHD)
- Ability to be focused and motivated linked to and affected by many other impacts of COVID-19, such as
  - Online learning: students indicate that it is easy to lose concentration with lack of face-to-face classes
  - Mental health
  - Financial worries
  - Loneliness
- More difficult to maintain a routine and organisation leads to lack of motivation

## LONELINESS AND DIFFICULTIES SOCIALISING

- Negative impacts of not being able to meet peers and socialise. This was reported by students of varied backgrounds, but particularly for first year and International students
- Loneliness and worsened mental health contribute to lack of productivity
- Group work is significantly more difficult to complete
- Face-to-face conversations with peers help students to clarify and understand content and assessments
- More difficult for students to find support networks

## ISSUES WITH ASSESSMENTS AND PRACTICAL CLASSES

- While almost all students mention difficulties with online learning, practical classes such as science labs or DAB workshops are severely affected, and students cannot learn or be assessed properly
  - Many nursing and midwifery students mention the large disruption and uncertainty caused
- Abrupt changes mean practical classes and assessments are not thoroughly thought out
- Fear about exams
- Many students report that the adapted assessments require more work
- Severe difficulties for HDR students

## TROUBLES WITH FAMILY OR HOUSEMATES

- Many students mention tensions with the people they live with: family or other housemates
- Students living far from their family expressed great concerns for them (such as parents job loss or family living in a country severely affected by COVID-19)
- Negative impact for students who relied on UTS to study due to living in a household too distracting or inappropriate for study
- Some students mention extra responsibility (e.g. living with at-risk family members)
- Students both forced to go home and forced to stay away from home

We then asked students:

*What initiatives are you aware of that UTS has committed to in response to COVID-19?*

*The four main takeaways from reading through all the responses submitted were:*

**1. STUDENTS ARE CONFUSED (AND RIGHTLY SO).**

Students are often misinformed or unaware of what they are/are not entitled to. This tells us there needs to be better communication so that struggling students can access the help they need.

**2. MANY RESPONDENTS BELIEVE THAT DOMESTIC STUDENTS ARE ENTITLED TO MORE THAN INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS**

Also some students indicate that International students have more difficulty understanding what they are entitled to and how to access the available support.

**3. STUDENTS ARE AWARE OF THE HARDSHIP FUND, BUT UNCERTAIN HOW TO APPLY FOR IT**

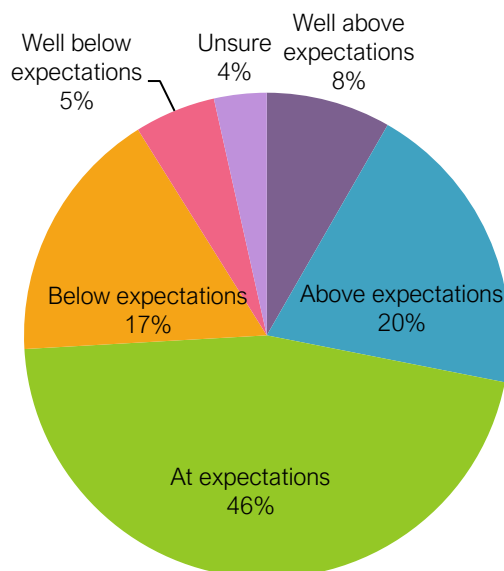
Many responses were positive and complimentary of what UTS has done in response to COVID-19. However, students were confused on how they can access some of the services that are supposedly available to them, in particular the COVID-19 Student Support Package.

**4. MANY STUDENTS THINK NOTHING IS BEING DONE.**

Of the 524 students who answered this question, 75 students believed UTS has done nothing. Beyond this, many other students stated that they thought the extent of UTS' response was just the provision of hand sanitiser or shutting down the campus.

While difficult to quantify what “expectations” are for dealing with COVID-19, we asked students:

*How well do you feel UTS has responded to COVID-19?*





As the UTS association *for* students, we are committed to helping where we can. At the time this survey was written, the initiatives that the UTS Students' Association were looking into are listed below. We asked students to vote how likely they would be to use these services.

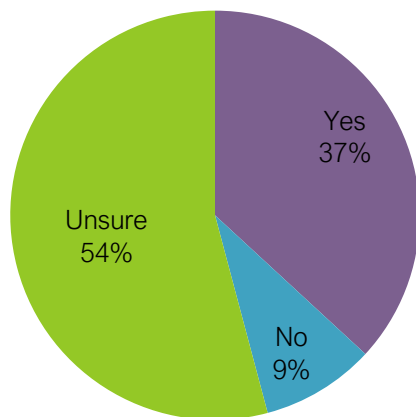
	<b>Highly likely</b>	<b>Likely</b>	<b>Unlikely</b>	<b>Highly unlikely</b>	<b>Unsure</b>	<b>Not applicable</b>
<b>Free Wifi dongle</b>	43.6%	23.3%	14.2%	7.8%	5.8%	5.3%
<b>Centrelink advice</b>	27.0%	30.9%	14.4%	6.1%	6.3%	15.3%
<b>Online collective forum events</b>	21.6%	34.1%	20.6%	8.8%	11.4%	3.6%
<b>Food provided (e.g. prepacked breakfasts)</b>	40.3%	22.7%	15.0%	8.6%	6.4%	7.0%
<b>Joining student campaigns</b>	20.5%	29.2%	21.1%	10.5%	14.1%	4.7%

What we took away from this:

- Of the students who completed this survey
  - 419 are likely or highly likely to use a free WiFi Dongle
  - 403 are likely or highly likely to use food provided (e.g. breakfast bags)
  - 371 are likely or highly likely to use free Centrelink advice

To gain further insight into what students wanted from the UTS Students' Association. We asked students

*Do you believe the UTS Students' Association could do more in response to COVID-19 than we are currently doing?*



The overwhelmingly high percentage of students that stated they were unsure indicates that we need to have clearer communications for what we are doing for students.

And if students thought we could be doing more, we asked them to give details on what they believed we could do.

Many of these responses were out of the capacity of the Students' Association (particularly fee reduction). All responses were read by members of the executive and their feasibility considered. The initiatives below are suggestions and the UTS Students' Association has not committed to all that are listed.

### **OPTIONAL PASS/FAIL SYSTEM AND ACADEMIC SUPPORT**

- Many students request that the Students' Association push the university to move to an optional pass/fail system due to the negative academic impact COVID-19 is having on students
- Students also have requested that if they receive fails, that they not be noted on academic transcripts
- As students are struggling with adapted learning and lifestyles, completing assessments to deadlines to their usual standard is difficult. Students mention wanting help navigating this.

### **MORE INFORMATION ABOUT CURRENT INITIATIVES**

- Students want a better breakdown of what UTS and the Students' Association are doing to help
  - More so, information and advice on how to access the support/initiatives
- Many students indicated wanting more frequent correspondence
- Information could be presented via Q&A zoom sessions
- Students generally want more correspondence from the Students' Association (Facebook posts, emails etc)

## CONTINUE THE SUGGESTED INITIATIVES

- Students gave support in favour of handing out free WiFi dongles and free breakfasts.
- Many students mentioned WiFi or data issues, that a WiFi dongle would presumably help with
- Meals and groceries would be incredibly helpful for struggling students
  - Students who mentioned using the Breakfast and Noodles services regularly particularly mentioned how eager they are for it to reopen
- Requests for computer hires

## SUPPORT FOR INTERNATIONAL STUDENTS

- Some respondents indicated they believed the Students' Association has failed to support International students in an event that disproportionately disadvantages them
- Ways to support International Students varied:
  - Financial support
  - Giving out vouchers for groceries
  - Help with the sense of extreme loneliness (e.g. online events)
  - Mental health workshops

## MORE RESOURCES AND EVENTS

- Students are not feeling a sense of belonging and mention online events could help with this
- Many students mention job losses and want help finding jobs
- Greater communication about mental health and what services are available to them
  - Large number of students in need of counselling and students are indicated that the UTS services are understaffed and it is hard to get appointments
- Promoting healthy lifestyle advice

## CAMPAIGNS: SPEAK UP FOR STUDENTS

- Students want the Students' Association to make demands on behalf of students and push the university to meet these demands
- Students want us to advocate for their needs
- Some of these demands include:
  - Support for postgraduate students
  - Support for International students
  - More leniency with assessment marking and deadlines
  - Better access to counsellors
  - Optional pass/fail system
  - No fails on academic transcript

Many students noted they were grateful to hear what the Students' Association has done and aiming to do. For some, this was their first time hearing about the Students' Association.

## To sum up, we asked if students had any further comments regarding UTS and COVID-19

Most of the responses in this question reiterated and gave more detail to comments earlier in the survey. Some comments were very brief, but others were very heartfelt and detailed. While Autumn Semester 2020 came as a shock, these responses indicate how passionate students are about the issues themselves and their peers are facing.

Below are a selection of quotes from answers to this question:

*“UTS seems like they're prioritising saving money over people, jobs and safety.”*

*“I think that [pass/fail system] would reduce a lot of the stress that this semester has brought.”*

*“We, as international students here, are so lost in making decision in either staying or going home, especially after the PM announced that it's time for temporary visa holders to go home if we can't finance ourselves at this time.”*

*“I hope UTS can create a website where we can leave our suggestion in related to COVID19.”*

*“UTS doesn't do enough to check up on its students and support everybody's mental health as best as it can.”*

*“I am usually quite a high achiever but I can't see myself feasibly achieving at the same level this semester.”*

*“I paid 20k this semester to have online classes and I haven't heard about being compensated back our fees as I am aware that most of my tuition is towards labs fees.”*

*“Given the uncertainty of the government's handling of the COVID-19 crisis, I think UTS is doing what it can with the complicated advice between the federal and NSW governments.”*

Some of the responses in this survey expressed mental health issues. If you or anyone you know need help right now, please do not hesitate to contact any of the following:

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### LIFELINE – CALL 13 11 14

Provides 24/7 crisis counselling, support groups and suicide prevention services.

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### SUICIDE CALL BACK SERVICE - CALL 1300 659 467

Provides 24/7 support if you or someone you know is feeling suicidal.

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### 1800 RESPECT – CALL 1800 737 732

The national sexual assault, family and domestic violence counselling service for anyone in Australia who has experienced, or is at risk of, family and domestic violence or sexual assault. 24/7 support.

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### IN AN EMERGENCY PLEASE CALL 000

## NEXT STEPS

# WHAT THE UTS STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION HAS ALREADY DONE

- Given out free breakfast bags for students which contain enough for roughly two weeks' worth of breakfast. Many more still available
- Demanded a 10% fee reduction for International Students
- Advertised that our caseworkers are giving out free Centrelink advice
- Given students the opportunity to get a \$20 Woolworths voucher simply by either signing up to become a peer tutor or requesting a peer tutor
- Increased the numbers of meetings we have had within the Students' Association and between Student Representatives and university management. The President and Education Vice-President of the Students' Association have made clear many of the demands and needs of students to UTS Management.
- Provided online resources for study and lifestyle advice for lockdown
- Conducted this survey:
  - Which has given us a greater understanding of issues from nearly 800 students
  - Gave students the opportunity to win one of three \$100 vouchers

# OUR COMMITMENTS AS THE UTS STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

- To continue with the services we are already offering (such as free breakfast bags, free Centrelink advice)
- To stand up and speak for students. We will demand:
  - Optional pass/fail system
  - No fails to be recorded on academic transcripts
  - Quicker and faster access to counselling services
- Monitor the impacts of invigilated online exams with ProctorU
  - Ensure UTS honours the commitments they have made to students, and that students are not worse off as a result of these measures
- Make students aware of support hotlines (such as for mental health and domestic violence)
- Provide better communications of what initiatives and support UTS and the UTS Students' Association have committed to
  - Provide clear information on how to access these initiatives and support
- To continue to listen to students' demands and to act upon them.

*Thank you to all students who took part. We really appreciate you taking the time to complete this survey.*