



2025

La Trobe University Student Union

Run by Students, For Students

Student Placement Poverty Update



From the Education Vice President



At La Trobe, we're told this is a university for the real world — a place that values equity, access, and impact. But for far too many students, especially those undertaking unpaid placements, that promise rings hollow.

Yet at La Trobe, despite public statements of support for the Australian Universities Accord, we have seen little meaningful change.

“We have seen little meaningful change.”

It has now been two years since La Trobe Student Union released our original Placement Poverty report. In that time, the federal government has acknowledged the issue and introduced limited reforms such as the Commonwealth Prac Payment.

Let's be clear: this is not a consultation problem. It is an implementation failure.

This updated report shows what happens when student-led research is ignored. It captures the lived realities of our peers who are forced to choose between placements and paid work, skipping meals, navigating impossible commutes, and dropping out due to avoidable stress.

We do not accept this as normal.

In 2025, we are not just revisiting placement poverty — we are renewing our demand that La Trobe act.

As a union, the largest representative student or staff body at La Trobe, we are stepping up: piloting targeted travel subsidies, expanding food relief, and supporting peer-led design of placement services. But student-led services should not exist to cover for institutional failures.

“Let's be clear: this is not a consultation problem. It is an implementation failure.”

This is our call for the University to take responsibility. To move beyond public statements. To act with urgency and integrity.

Because no student should have to live in poverty to complete their degree.

Tharun

In solidarity,
Tharun Balasubramanian
Education Vice President



La Trobe Student Union acknowledges the Traditional Custodians of the land on which we work, the Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung people of the Kulin Nation. We pay our respects to their Elders past, present, and emerging, and acknowledge sovereignty has never been ceded. Always was, always will be, Aboriginal land.



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The Time for Action on Placement Poverty

The Australian Universities Accord, released in February 2024, presented 47 recommendations to reform Australia's higher education system. The report represented a fundamental shift in how the sector approaches equity, access, and quality in tertiary education.

This builds upon the Commonwealth Government's commitment to reform including legislation guaranteeing Commonwealth Supported Places for First Nations students, which took effect in November 2023.



Placement Poverty continues to be a barrier to success

As with La Trobe Student Union's 2023 placement poverty report, students from across Australia provided some of the most compelling feedback during the Accord consultation process. This was particularly seen regarding the financial hardship caused by unpaid work placements.

Placement poverty is widespread and creates significant barriers for students discouraging enrolment in courses requiring placements and preventing completion of degrees. The financial strain forces many students to choose between their academic progress and their basic living needs.

Recognising the severity of this problem, the Accord recommended the Australian Government collaborate with universities and employers to introduce payment structures for placements, with priority given to government financial support for teaching, nursing, and care sectors.

The Accord extended its reform agenda beyond financial considerations to encompass student welfare and safety. The Accord called for the development of a national student charter that would establish comprehensive protections for student welfare, safety and wellbeing including specific provisions for those undertaking work placements.

“Placement poverty is widespread and creates significant barriers for students.”

This recommendation addressed longstanding concerns about universities' and regulatory bodies' inadequate responses to student and staff safety issues, particularly regarding sexual assault and harassment. The proposed charter would establish clearer, more responsive, and genuinely student centred processes for addressing these critical concerns.

Student lived experience must be at the core

“The majority of students undertaking placements struggle to afford basic necessities including food, rent, and medication, with many experiencing significant rental stress.

These national findings align closely with evidence gathered by La Trobe Student Union through direct member and student engagement. Our 2023 report, Student Placement Poverty, revealed that the majority of students undertaking placements struggle to afford basic necessities including food, rent, and medication, with many experiencing significant rental stress.

Students at La Trobe Melbourne (Bundoora) consistently reported receiving inadequate notice about placement dates, with most receiving only one to three weeks' notice and some given less than one week. This short timeframe severely limits students' ability to make necessary arrangements for transport, childcare, or work and study schedule adjustments, whilst delays in university responses to placement requests compound these stressors.

The Commonwealth Prac Payment is a partial solution

“Eligible domestic students in Commonwealth Supported Places [are provided] with \$319.50 per week during placement.

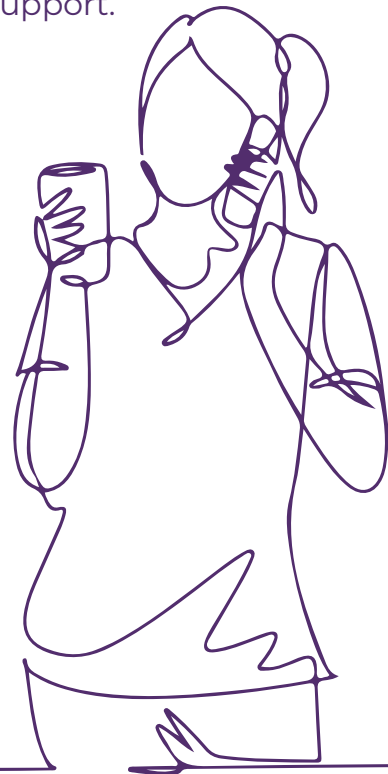
The Commonwealth Prac Payment represents a positive step towards addressing placement poverty by providing eligible domestic students in Commonwealth Supported Places with \$319.50 per week during placement periods.

This financial support aims to reduce the economic pressure on students completing mandatory unpaid placements and acknowledges the legitimate costs associated with these educational requirements.

However, the program's scope remains limited to placements in

- 1. Teaching
- 2. Nursing
- 3. Midwifery
- 4. Social Work

leaving students in allied health and other disciplines with mandatory placement requirements without equivalent support.



A disappointing response from La Trobe University

Despite La Trobe University's participation in the Accord consultation process, noting an alignment between the Accord recommendations and the University's own proposals, there is limited evidence of formal policy changes. As of October 2025, the institution has not implemented significant changes directly resulting from the Accord.

More concerning is the University leadership's apparent disengagement with the Student Union's research findings and what students are telling us. The response to our Student Placement Poverty report has been characterised as disappointing and limited, with the University failing to formally respond or engage meaningfully with the student union's evidence-based recommendations. This silence raises serious questions about the

University's genuine commitment to incorporating student feedback and lived experience into policy development and implementation.

“**[La Trobe's] silence raises serious questions about genuine commitment to incorporating student feedback and lived experience into policy development and implementation.**”

The University's failure to engage with student-led research represents a fundamental rejection of student-centred design principles. When institutions ignore

evidence gathered directly from students' lived experiences, they demonstrate that consultation processes serve public relations purposes rather than genuine policy reform.

Students are not merely data points to be consulted; they are experts in their own experiences whose insights should fundamentally shape institutional responses.



La Trobe's policies are still falling short

La Trobe University has tepidly voiced support for the Accord's objectives in principle and has promoted the Commonwealth Prac Payment (CPP) of \$319.50 per week for eligible teaching, nursing, midwifery and social work students. However, its internal procedures and policy implementation concerning student welfare, logistics, and financial support for placements fall short of the reforms envisioned by the Accord's recommendations. The CPP represents only a partial solution, as students in allied health and other disciplines with mandatory placements remain without equivalent financial support.



“Current La Trobe University policies fail to reflect either the Accord's recommendations or the evidence presented in our research.”

Current La Trobe University policies fail to reflect either the Accord's recommendations or evidence presented in our research. La Trobe's Work Experience Placement, Cadetship or Internship Procedure policy misaligns with the Accord's direction, continuing to place responsibility on students to arrange their own travel and accommodation for placements. This approach directly contradicts Recommendation 14 - a call for institutional financial support for students undertaking placements and demonstrates a concerning disconnect between policy rhetoric and practical implementation.

Whilst La Trobe University has indicated that this procedure is supposedly under review as part of

updates related to the Enterprise Agreement implemented in January 2024, there is no clear indication that this review incorporates Accord recommendations or prioritises genuine student needs over administrative compliance.

The ongoing policy review process represents an opportunity for meaningful reform, yet the University appears to be proceeding without reference to available evidence about student experiences or national policy directions. This demonstrates that policy updates remain focused on administrative compliance rather than genuine student welfare improvements.

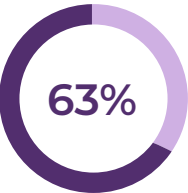
Understanding the economic strain on students

Placement poverty does not exist in isolation. It is layered atop broader systemic issues, housing insecurity, food poverty, transport costs, and gaps in essential health and wellbeing support.

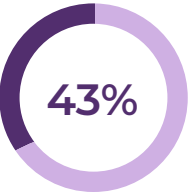
La Trobe Student Union's 2025 Our Money, Our Way report confirms a pervasive reality, La Trobe students are under significant financial pressure that directly affects their education:

- 63% of students worry about money either constantly or frequently, and 43% run out of money regularly before payday.
- 1 in 4 students skip meals due to cost, while a similar number struggle to afford medication.
- Even among working students, underemployment is widespread. Many are juggling multiple jobs while on placement or sacrificing income to complete mandatory unpaid work.

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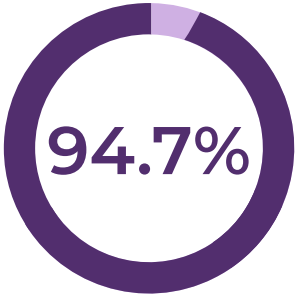


43% run out of money regularly before pay day.

Impact on daily life and educational access

Across multiple engagement and surveys, La Trobe's Melbourne (Bundoora) students reveal that economic pressures have direct academic impacts.

In our 2025 Student Parking Survey, nearly a third of students told the Student Union they spend over \$20–\$40 per week just to travel to La Trobe Melbourne (Bundoora).



94.7% said they would attend campus more often if parking was free or cheaper, suggesting direct links between access costs and academic engagement.

“50% of students often cannot afford period products.”

In our 2025 Period Poverty report, 50% of students often cannot afford period products, with over 27% skipping class or social activities as a result.

The burden is particularly sharp for first-generation students (38%), students with disability, and those from culturally diverse backgrounds, all of whom are disproportionately represented in economic hardship responses.

Understanding student need through supports

La Trobe Student Union's direct and trusted engagement with students reveals the depth and breadth of financial hardship facing the student body.

Our services respond to immediate student needs that universities often overlook providing critical evidence of systemic issues requiring institutional reform rather than stopgap charity.

Our food bank operates as an emergency response to widespread food insecurity among students. In 2025, the Student Union has often seen up to 350 students in need using the food bank each day. The consistent demand for this service demonstrates that students are regularly making impossible choices between purchasing textbooks, paying rent, affording transport, and eating adequately.

When students are undertaking unpaid placements, they cannot work their usual shifts, food bank usage increases sharply, providing concrete evidence of placement poverty's real-world impact on student wellbeing. With 1 in 4 students skipping meals due to cost, the food bank should not exist as a permanent emergency measure – it exists because institutional policies consistently fail to address student food security proactively.

Our services respond to immediate student needs that universities often overlook.

For students on placement who face additional costs for

1 in 4 students skip meals due to cost.



professional attire, transport, and accommodation, the inability to afford basic menstrual products represents yet another dimension of placement poverty that institutional policies consistently fail to address.

These interconnected challenges demonstrate how placement poverty exists within a broader context of student financial hardship that universities must address systemically rather than piecemeal.

Why student lived experience must shape supports

It is no longer sufficient for universities to consult students after the fact or offer support designed without their involvement. Students have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to identify barriers and propose meaningful solutions. But university responses, especially regarding placement policy, have too often ignored student-led evidence or treated it as optional.

Lived experience must be the foundation of all reform efforts. Support services exist because students tell us what they need.

When universities design policies in isolation from student voices, they create systems that serve administrative convenience rather than student wellbeing.

The evidence from our food bank, period poverty program, parking advocacy, and placement research demonstrates that students understand their own needs better than any administrative committee ever could.

Students must be empowered not just as service users but as co-creators of solutions.

When universities design policies in isolation from student voices, they create systems that serve administrative convenience rather than student wellbeing.



What needs to change

Lived experience should inform every aspect of placement reform. Students must be embedded in co-design panels, evaluation teams, and governance structures. Universities must stop designing services around institutional convenience and start building around students' actual needs. The absence of concrete action on placement support is particularly troubling given the University's continued reliance on general student support services rather than targeted interventions.

Two years after the release of our Student Placement Poverty report, none of La Trobe Student Union's specific recommendations have been formally addressed or implemented.

These recommendations remain highly relevant and should inform how placement programs are designed, delivered, and supported across all disciplines requiring practical experience components.



1

Full funding for all student placements

Students undertaking work placements face substantial economic hardship when these positions remain uncompensated. The financial burden extends beyond lost income opportunities to encompass accommodation costs, medical requirements, travel expenses, and potential housing relocation. These accumulated costs create barriers to educational participation and compromise student wellbeing throughout their professional learning experience.

Student placements to be fully funded as they would be for any other job. When 43% of students run out of money regularly before payday and 1 in 4 skip meals due to cost, requiring them to complete unpaid professional work compounds already unsustainable economic circumstances. When students must choose between eating adequately and completing their degrees, the University has failed its fundamental duty of care.



2 Minimum eight weeks' notice for all placements

The current practice of last-minute placement allocation creates unnecessary stress and practical difficulties for students. Our findings reveal that most students receive between one to three weeks' notification, insufficient time for proper preparation and planning. University placement coordinators must recognise that adequate advance notice enables students to arrange accommodation, adjust work commitments, and prepare mentally for their professional experience, ultimately enhancing placement outcomes.

Students must be given a minimum of eight weeks' notice of placement. Students consistently report that inadequate notice periods prevent them from making necessary arrangements for childcare, transport, work schedule adjustments, and accommodation. When students are juggling multiple jobs to afford basic necessities and 63% worry about money constantly or frequently, last minute placement notifications create cascading crises that jeopardise both financial and academic success.

This administrative failure compounds financial stress and demonstrates institutional disregard for students' complex life circumstances.

3 Address the competitive nature of placements

The intense competition for desirable placement positions creates additional pressure in an already demanding process. Students competing for limited opportunities in sought-after organisations face heightened stress when combined with insufficient notice periods. This competitive environment, compounded by poor communication timing, forces students to make hasty decisions that may conflict with existing academic and personal responsibilities.

Student wellbeing must be prioritised over administrative convenience in placement allocation processes.

When placement competition creates additional barriers to student success, the University must examine how its systems perpetuate inequitable access to quality professional learning opportunities.

4

Comprehensive orientation and effective supervision

La Trobe University should ensure that every student participating in a placement, regardless of their field of study, receives a comprehensive orientation pack. This pack should include essential information about the placement process, outlining the specific tasks, responsibilities, and duties that students are expected to complete during their time at the placement. By providing clear guidelines and expectations upfront, the University would help students feel more prepared, confident, and capable as they embark on real-world experiences in their respective fields.

Effective supervision and mentoring remain inconsistent across placement sites, leaving students without essential professional development support. Students require comprehensive information about placement expectations, including detailed guidelines on professional conduct, leave entitlements, and assessment criteria. Clear communication protocols between the University and placement providers are essential to ensure students receive consistent guidance throughout their professional learning journey.

Students have repeatedly told us that unclear expectations and inadequate supervision undermine their placement experiences. When the University fails to provide consistent, high-quality supervision across all placement sites, it demonstrates that student learning outcomes remain secondary to administrative efficiency. Students are excluded from decisions about their supervision, support channels, and conflict resolution processes – yet they bear the consequences when these systems fail.

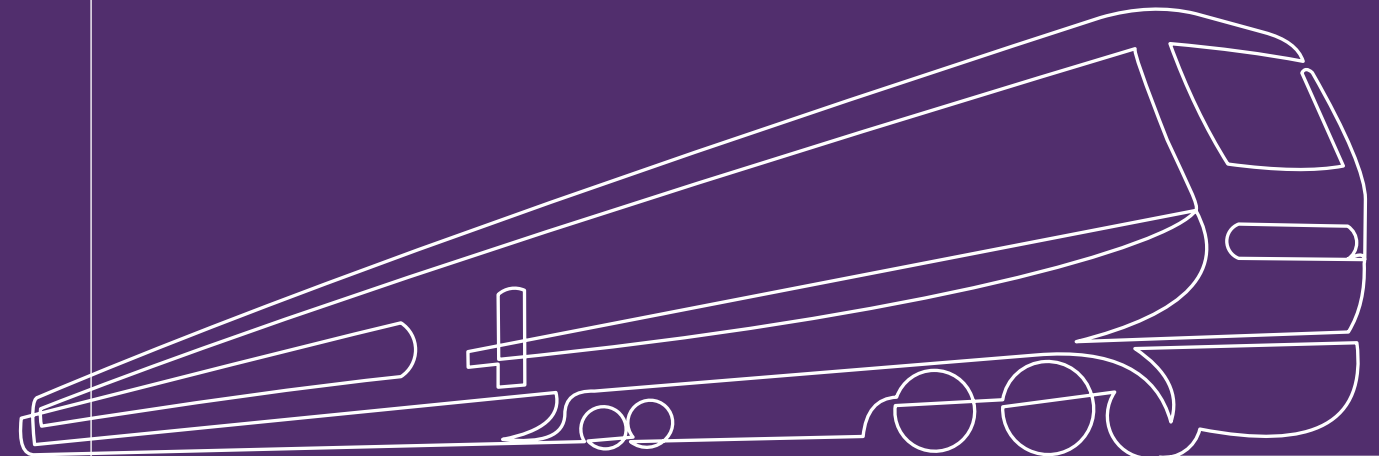
5

Geographic accessibility guarantee

Geographic accessibility represents a significant barrier to successful placement completion, particularly given Melbourne's sprawling metropolitan area and Victoria's regional distances. Extended commuting requirements of up to four hours daily place unreasonable physical and financial demands on students. The University must prioritise placement proximity to student residences, recognising that excessive travel time detracts from learning outcomes and creates unsustainable personal circumstances.

La Trobe University must provide a guarantee that students are not expected to travel further than one hour from their home to complete work placements. La Trobe Student Union's parking survey revealed that nearly a third of students already spend over \$20-\$40 per week just to travel to campus for regular classes.

The University compounds placement poverty with additional financial and time burdens that make degree completion unsustainable. Students with disability and those from culturally diverse backgrounds – already disproportionately represented in economic hardship responses – face compounded barriers when placement locations are inaccessible or require prohibitive travel costs.





6 Audit placement supervisors for consistency

Consistency in placement quality requires systematic oversight of supervisory practices across all partner organisations. Students encounter vastly different professional environments and expectations, creating inequitable learning experiences. Regular evaluation of placement providers ensures students receive comparable professional development opportunities regardless of their allocated organisation, maintaining educational standards across all placement sites.

The University must audit placement supervisors to ensure uniformity of student placement experience. Students deserve equitable learning opportunities regardless of which placement site they are allocated. Systematic oversight ensures that all students receive the professional development and support necessary for successful degree completion.

First-generation students, students with disability, and those from culturally diverse backgrounds must not face additional disadvantages due to inconsistent and inadequate supervisory quality.

7 Timely response to placement issues

Timely communication from university support services is critical when students encounter placement difficulties.

Current response time averaging three days prove inadequate given the time-sensitive nature of placement issues and academic deadlines. Prompt resolution of student concerns requires dedicated support staff with clear response protocols, ensuring students receive immediate assistance when navigating placement challenges.

Student work placement issues must be responded to by the relevant party within one business day if not sooner. Students routinely encounter delays in institutional responses – especially dangerous during time-sensitive placements where transport, supervision, or conflict issues arise. When students face placement crises, delayed institutional responses compound stress and potentially jeopardise academic progress. Students already managing significant financial pressure and complex life circumstances cannot afford bureaucratic delays that treat their urgent concerns as administrative inconveniences. Responsive support systems demonstrate genuine institutional commitment to student welfare.

From consultation to co-design: Student partnership in practice

“It is no longer sufficient for universities to consult students after the fact or offer support designed without their involvement.”

It is no longer sufficient for universities to consult students after the fact or offer support designed without their involvement. If universities want to address these issues holistically, they must embed students' lived experience into every stage of planning, designing, and delivering services that affect them.



La Trobe must commit to embedding student partnership into every level of service intended to support placements and alleviate poverty. This includes:

Student-Led Service Audits:

Evaluating travel reimbursements, food and housing assistance, and placement logistics. Students with lived experience of these systems understand their failures and strengths better than external evaluators.

Peer Support Design Labs:

Where students with lived experience of hardship co-design better access to financial aid, food security programs, or placement scheduling systems. The success of LTSU's food bank, period poverty initiative, and parking advocacy demonstrates that student-designed services respond more effectively to actual needs.

Co-Governance Models:

With dedicated roles for students on committees responsible for placement operations, student wellbeing, and university budgeting. Students must have decision-making power, not merely advisory roles. Co-design processes must genuinely incorporate student perspectives from initial conceptualisation through implementation and evaluation.

Funded Student Roles:

For lived experience consultants and outreach ambassadors within faculties, especially Nursing, Education, Social Work, and Allied Health. Students' expertise in navigating systems designed to support them should be formally recognised and compensated.

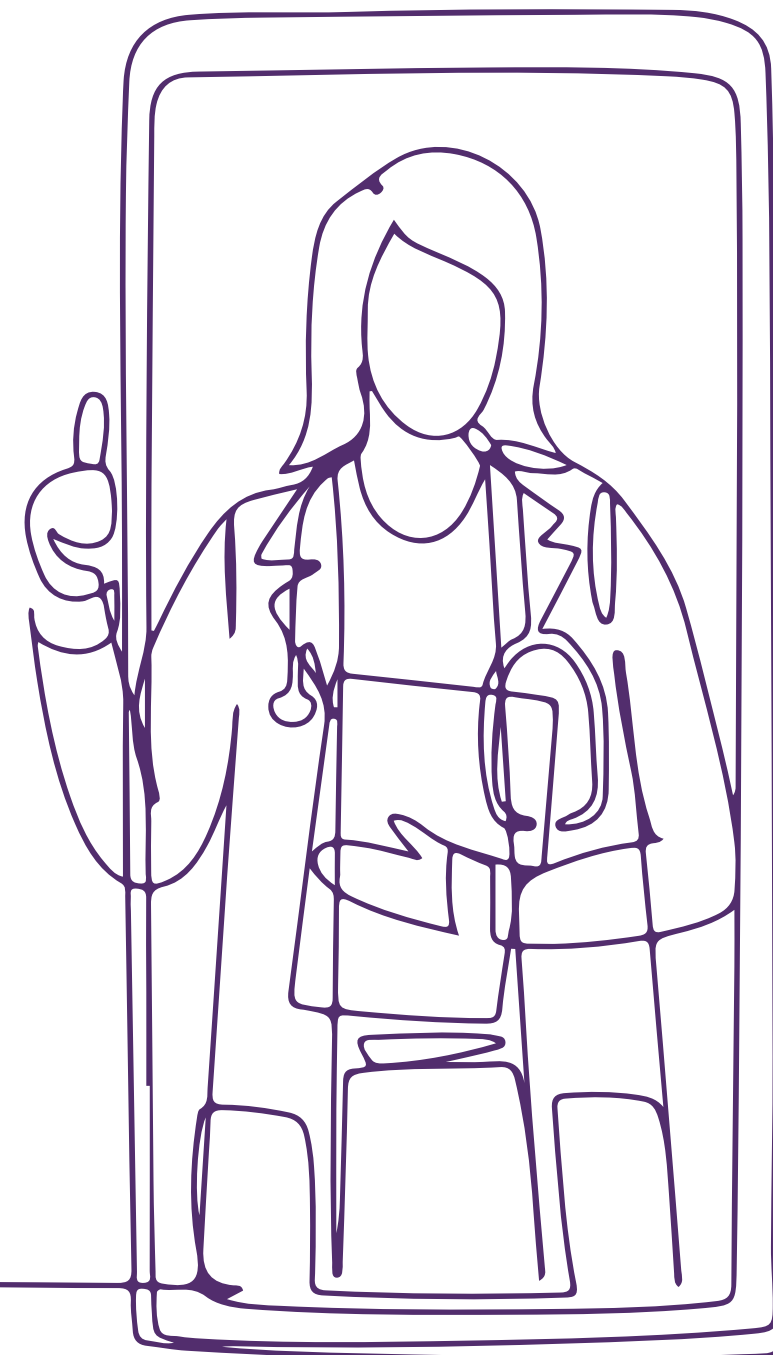
La Trobe Student Union's work demonstrates what student-centred design looks like in practice. Our food bank exists because students told us they were going hungry. Our period poverty program exists because students told us they were making impossible choices about basic health needs. Parking advocacy exists because students told us that transport costs create significant barriers to campus access.

These initiatives emerged from listening to students and responding to their articulated needs rather than imposing solutions designed in administrative solutions. Universities must adopt this same approach to placement reform. Students are not passive recipients of educational services; they are active participants whose lived experiences provide essential insights that no amount of administrative expertise can replicate.

When placement policies are designed without meaningful student input, they inevitably fail to address the complex, interconnected challenges that students face.

Student representation in governance structures cannot be tokenistic. Every policy affecting student placements should be tested against the fundamental question: "Does this serve student needs or administrative convenience?"

“These initiatives emerged from listening to students and responding to their articulated needs rather than imposing solutions designed in administrative isolation.”



Students' Call to Action

La Trobe Student Union urges La Trobe University leadership to engage seriously with our research findings and implement our practical, evidence-based recommendations. These actions would create more equitable, less stressful, and more manageable placement experiences for the students who are required to complete them as essential components of their degrees. Students are not asking for charity. They are demanding dignity.

Students have spoken clearly about what they need.

Data from LTSU's 2025 research makes this clear. Placement support, campus services, and institutional processes must reflect the lived reality of La Trobe students today - not theoretical policy frameworks.

The time for consultation has passed; students need concrete action that acknowledges their legitimate concerns and supports their academic and professional development. Our food bank should not be a permanent fixture of student life. Our period poverty program should not be necessary. Students should not struggle to afford parking while completing unpaid professional work. These services reveal systemic failures that require institutional reform, not charitable bandages.

Students have spoken clearly about what they need. The University must now demonstrate whether it genuinely values student voices or whether consultation processes serve only to create the appearance of engagement without meaningful action.

The choice facing University leadership is clear: embrace student-centred design principles and implement evidence-based reforms, or continue perpetuating systems that serve administrative convenience while students struggle unnecessarily.

By embedding student voice, La Trobe can begin closing the gap between policy rhetoric and real-life impact. Universities must stop designing services around institutional convenience and start building around students' actual needs.

Students are not asking for charity. They are demanding dignity.

We call on La Trobe University to place students at the heart of placement reform, to honour the lived experiences students have shared, and to implement the concrete, practical changes that will make placement experiences equitable, sustainable, and genuinely supportive of student success.



Who We Are

The La Trobe University Student Union is the peak representative body for over 23,000 La Trobe University students at the Melbourne (Bundoora) campus. Our representation is led by and for students and also incorporates the ISC (International Students Collective) and MASO (Mature Age Students Organisation).

For 60 years the LTSU has shaped the University, supporting everything from new facilities such as the Sports Centre to Union Hall, providing vital services, tirelessly fighting for the rights of students at La Trobe, and more.

This report was student planned and led. Ross Dennis, an independent researcher, aided with the collection and analysis of data. The LTSU is the voice for students and will continue to advocate for a better experience for students and members.

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Established in 1967, the purpose of the LTSU is to advance the education of students of La Trobe University by:

- enhancing the learning experience of students while at the University;
- promoting the interests and welfare of students;
- representing students within and outside the University;
- co-ordinating and supporting the activities of students; and
- providing amenities and services for students, other members of the University community and the public.







Run by Students, For Students

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