The Space Squeeze:

A report by the Monash Postgraduate Association on behalf of Caulfield campus postgraduates

February 2010

The MPA would like to bring to your attention a growing concern among Caulfield postgraduates about the lack of study space on campus, the recent downgrade of A1.39 (one of the postgraduate computer labs), the overcrowded library facilities, the security bus service and the lack of available housing. Together these concerns are a source of considerable anxiety to postgraduates and ultimately affect the quality of their work.

While the lack of study space is almost exclusively a concern for coursework postgraduates (and undergraduates), the remaining three issues affect all students, and the group most significantly affected by the combination of issues is that of international postgraduates, who are heavy users of university campus services.

For many international postgraduates arriving in Melbourne the extreme difficulties in finding appropriate accommodation means that students are often living in overcrowded conditions with little chance of finding study space at home. Without the ability to study at home, postgraduates are more reliant on their campus to provide appropriate space. This places a huge strain on the library and general campus study spaces. In turn, as postgraduates stay on campus longer and later into the night, the demand for secure transport home increases. The accommodation shortage also results in postgraduates being forced to live further from campus, out of range of the security bus route; a situation which is of great concern in the current climate of reports about violence against international students.

International coursework postgraduate fees provide a source of considerable income for the university. In return, coursework postgraduates expect, at the very minimum, access to basic facilities and services from an institution of Monash’s standing. Currently, the quality of the student experience at Caulfield falls short of postgraduate expectations.

It should be noted that most staff, in particular library and campus management staff, go to extraordinary lengths to accommodate student needs. The issues raised in this paper are not a reflection on staff, whose efforts are much appreciated by postgraduates, but on the constraints imposed on staff by the shortcomings of the facilities and environment within which they operate.
Contents

1. Student numbers at Caulfield campus 3
2. Library space 3
3. Campus study space 4
4. Student housing 5
5. Security 5
6. Conclusion 5
Attachment 1: Postgraduate comments 6
1. Student numbers at Caulfield campus

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monash University 2008 statistics published May 2009</th>
<th>Number of students</th>
<th>Break up of population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total student population at Caulfield (relying on access to library facilities and services and security bus)</td>
<td>13,116</td>
<td>HDR 654 GPG 5324 UG 7138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coursework postgraduates at Caulfield (relying on access to 24/7 postgraduate-specific study spaces and computer labs)</td>
<td>5,324</td>
<td>Int GPG 2666 Dom GPG 2658</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International students at Caulfield (relying on access to accommodation)</td>
<td>4976</td>
<td>Int PG 2791 Int UG 2185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

While the postgraduate population has remained relatively stable at Caulfield, the proportion of international postgraduates to domestic postgraduates is increasing.

2. Library space

“I am writing for you now from the library where I sit on the ground because of lack of spaces. I could not find a space to study therefore I am sitting on the ground waiting for some other people to finish and sit in their places.”

Students are often unable to find a quiet study space with computer access. They report that the library is crowded and noisy, that all five postgraduate labs are full most of the time, and that students queue and compete for study space. Space for discussion and group work is a legitimate requirement and a particular need for coursework students. These problems will continue to escalate as international student numbers increase at Caulfield. In addition, we note that:

- the average floor space per student in the Caulfield Library is approximately half that of libraries on other campuses;
- the number of Caulfield Library visits exceeded 1.24 million by the end of 2009;
- despite recent improvements to the library and the library extending its opening times to 99 hours per week, existing space constraints prevent the library from providing adequate access to seating and computer terminals at core times, and an adequately-stocked collection.

**Recommendation 1:** That the university ensure the expansion of the Caulfield library, currently in planning stages, is moved to high priority.

---

1 Excerpt from an email sent to the MPA by a postgraduate student. See Attachment 1.
3. Campus study space

“I am studying in A (A1.39) lounge Quiet Area Computer lab right now on Saturday afternoon and I would like to bring it up to your notice that, all the chairs and computers are occupied and FULL. Students are still coming in and going back with regret, as they cannot find space to study...Most universities have sufficient space to study on the campus but Monash Caulfield campus study areas are inadequate for postgraduates.”

At the end of 2009 the ITS withdrew 20 computers from the postgraduate computer lab A1.39, citing budget cuts. Because this lab is heavily used and highly regarded by postgraduates, Caulfield campus management provided funds to replace 10 of the computers. Reducing the number of computers by half will only exacerbate the study space problems on the campus.

The MPA understands that the university is moving away from computer labs towards the establishment of a wireless environment where students provide their own laptops. However it is important to remember that some postgraduates, particularly within the low-income postgraduate cohort, do not own a laptop. In addition, those who do own a laptop need to access software which can only be used on university computers. We have been informed that the university is currently in negotiations to broaden software licences to allow for various programs to be installed by students on their personal laptops. Until that time, the university has an obligation to ease that transition. For an additional $10,000 another 10 computers could be provided and the computer lab would be fully functional for a further three years.

**Recommendation 2:** That the university provide the $10,000 funding required to enable A1.39 to continue to operate in its full capacity as a computer lab for the next three years.

“It seems a lot of students like myself have to confined to sitting at a common couch without proper table and chair to study. I appeal to the university to take the necessary action to resolve the matter, as it will be a good step to improve the welfare of the student”.

The shortage of study-space reaches critical point immediately before and during exam periods. While the provision of additional space is clearly a long-term goal, there are some measures which could be taken to alleviate the situation in the short-term.

**Recommendation 3:** That the university utilise any vacant space as temporary study space, particularly around exam periods.

The syndicate rooms in Building H are made available to postgraduates for private study, but the current booking system requires students to book via email with Monash University Venues making it difficult for students to meet immediately after their lectures or at short notice as the turn around time between requesting a booking

---

1. Excerpt from an email sent to the MPA by a postgraduate student. See Attachment 1.
and receiving confirmation can be as long as four days. Postgraduates are often required to meet within days of receiving group assignments. There have also been booking errors resulting in double-bookings. A real-time booking system would alleviate this problem.

**Recommendation 4:** That the university create a real-time booking system for the syndicate rooms which can be accessed directly by students.

4. Student Housing

A shortage of accommodation due to record low vacancy rates³ means that students are more likely to be living in accommodation that is inconveniently located, expensive, and/or lacks private study space. International postgraduates are often mature-aged mid-career professionals with permanent jobs to which they can or must return, and are sometimes accompanied by their partners and dependants. As international student numbers continue to increase at Caulfield there is an increased risk that the university’s inability to provide adequate housing will diminish recruitment opportunity of this key cohort.

**Recommendation 5:** That, when developing student accommodation, the university consider locations that sit within the security bus route, and include family-style accommodation for its growing international postgraduate population.

5. Security

At the MPA’s semester 2 forum at Caulfield last year, students reported that extra security bus services were needed. Buses were not always able to accommodate those waiting and students had to wait up to one hour outside, often at night, for the next bus.

**Recommendation 6:** That the university extend hours and area serviced by the security bus service to meet student needs.

6. Conclusion

The MPA looks forward to working cooperatively with the university to develop practical responses to improve the postgraduate experience and strengthen the university’s international reputation. The MPA welcomes the opportunity to discuss these matters further.

³ REIV reports a rental vacancy rate of 1.5% for Melbourne in December 2009
http://www.reiv.com.au
Attachment 1: Postgraduate comments

The MPA called for comments from postgraduates on the proposed closure of the A1.39 computer lab. Thirty-six emails had been received at the time of writing this report. Five are reprinted below as examples. All emails can be provided on request.

When I first came to Monash University. My first impression of the University was one that was intent on providing quality education to its students. I was under the impression that this also implied the provision of adequate resources to cater for their students needs.

However, during the examination period, I have begun to question the capability of the university to provide adequate facilities to cater for the growing number of students it enrols in various courses.

As a postgraduate student on Caulfield campus, I spend too much time looking for a computer lab to do my studying and the library in my opinion is way too small to cater for all the students that need to use it for study (this is especially evident during the examination period).

I have had to resort using my laptop to study in corridors with available power points in order to be able to access the university’s wireless facilities. However, earlier this week that proved futile since all the postgraduates who could not find a study area had resorted to the same practice. So after finding a suitable place to sit in a corridor I was only able to use my laptop for around 2 hours before it went off.

That the University is considering getting rid of the A1.39 computer lab baffles me. This will only make the plight of the postgraduates worse since we are already deprived of the much needed study resources. I am really beginning to think about whether the fees postgraduates pay justifies the services the university offers.

(Master Bus Eco)

I am writing to express my deep concerns regarding the issue of closing the lab of A1.39
This is totally unacceptable action. Many students like me were looking forward to hear about opening and making new spaces for students to study in.
I am writing for you now from the library where I sit on the ground because of lack of spaces. I could not find a space to study therefore I am sitting on the ground waiting for some other people to finish and sit in their places.

So, I am asking the Authorities in Monash to go through the library in a normal day and see the over over overcrowd there before deciding to close that lab. May be they would decide to open more PG labs because I think that is what they need to do in order to provide a real educational environment as we hope to see in our lovely uni MONASH.

(Master IT)
I am studying in a lounge Quiet Area Computer lab right now on Saturday afternoon and I would like to bring it up to your notice that, all the chairs and computers are occupied and FULL. Students are still coming in and going back with regret, as they cannot find space to study. This is the most crucial time for students to study and get optimum service from the university to provide facilities that can help us enhance our objectives towards achieving good grades. Most universities have sufficient space to study on the campus but Monash Caulfield campus study areas are inadequate for postgraduates.

I would request Monash to please make more arrangements for Postgraduate students to study in University as there is lack of space. Postgraduate courses are rigorous and need extra time and dedication to do well. Students study much more with respect to time and resources compared to undergrad. Please increase the size of Postgraduate Lounge, and help us achieve better grades.

(Master Bus Eco)

I was so shocked to hear the news. Actually, I just came back from university and have to study at home because all of the labs in Caulfield campus have already been full. It is totally ridiculous that the university considering to close some labs while the demand still remains highly!

The excuse about the costs is unreasonable. As an international student, I have already paid a higher fees (compared to other universities) in order to gain a good study facilities. I think it is unfair that the amount of facilities be reduced while the tuition fees increase every year!

I hope the one, who is going to make the decision, go and take a look at the situation of our postgraduate lounge, the labs and the study areas in the library. Is it easy to find a place to study????

(Faculty unknown)

I'd like to stress my concerns regarding the limitation of study areas with computer facilities in the caulfield campus. i have heard some news that postgraduate lab A1.39 is to be closed. the fact is that even with existence of the postgraduate lab A1.39, sometimes I as a postgraduate student am struggling to find a vacant seat and I have to check the library and all the computer labs. The expectation is to expand special study facilities for postgraduate students not reverse.

(Master Bus Eco)