

REPORT

SUBJECT **2020 Student Services and Amenities Fee Survey**

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Executive Summary

The 2020 Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF) Survey was available to all 28,123 coursework students and higher degree by research candidates enrolled in an ANU degree program 6-14 October 2020. Students allocated a notional \$100 across 10 areas of advocacy, services or activities supported by SSAF. Responses were analysed in terms of how many students recorded \$0 against an area and then the non-\$0 distribution of responses as a total sample, then by degree type and by study location.

The findings show that students want to see a proportionally equal allocation of SSAF to eight of the ten areas. The only areas consistently receiving a higher allocation were “health, welfare and well-being” and “student support and advice”.

This suggests that students either want to see an increase in funding going to student services and amenities such that no area is worse off, or they are willing to see small reductions in some areas to increase the level of funding available in favour of the two areas identified.

Future versions of the SSAF survey may wish to consider going beyond generic areas to include more specific areas and areas of interest across the ANU community. For example, the SSAF areas in this version of the survey tend to be campus-centric, which may need to change given the proportion of respondents studying off-campus (e.g. “digital” support). Equally, there is scope to find ways to engage communities who may want to see funding directed to areas missing from the 2020 survey (e.g. students with a disability or coming from a low socio-economic background).

Background

On 11 October 2011, the Australian Parliament passed legislation allowing universities and other higher education providers to charge a fee for student services and amenities of a non-academic nature. This fee is known as the student services and amenities fee (SSAF). The fee may be spent by higher education providers on items such as sporting and recreational activities, employment and career advice, childcare, financial advice and food services.

As part of a broader consultation process informing the allocation of the SSAF for 2021, the Deputy Vice Chancellor (Student and University Experience) (DVC SUE) directed Planning and Performance Measurement (PPM) to conduct a survey that asked ANU coursework students and higher degree by research (HDR) candidates to indicate how they would like to see a notional \$100 allocated across a range of typical SSAF relevant areas.

ANU students and HDR candidates were invited to respond to the survey on Tuesday, 6th of October, 2020, with a reminder sent on the morning of Wednesday, 14th of October, 2020 and the survey closing at 11:59pm that day.

Data collection

Following consultation with key stakeholders, the Office of DVC SUE identified 10 key areas of funding for students and HDR candidates to consider. Students and HDR candidates were asked to allocate \$100 across the 10 areas (randomised presentation to mitigate order of presentation effects). These areas were keyed into the Qualtrics survey platform as a 'constant sum' question, with a requirement that the combined response must equal \$100. Respondents were presented with \$0 default responses to all items.

Only two demographic questions were asked. This was for two reasons. The first was to limit the effect of survey length on response volume and response quality. The second was, as a focused rather than exploratory survey, to discipline the analysis to focus on 'need-to-have' demographic information.

The two demographic questions asked students and HDR candidates their study location (in Canberra, on-campus; in Canberra, off-campus; in Australia, outside Canberra; outside Australia) and degree type (undergraduate, post-graduate coursework or HDR candidate).

The survey was deployed to the Registrar's students.all mailing list. The mailing list held 28,123 addresses at the time the survey was deployed. The list is made up of the 22,262 active students (enrolled in courses in 2020) and 5,861 inactive students (enrolled 2016-2020). Of the inactive students, 2,848 were unidentifiable in enrolment records 2016-2020.

Analytic Approach

\$0 Responses

The analytic approach undertaken here accounts for \$0 as a default response. However, this default can be interpreted as missing data (there was no response in relation to the area) or a valid response (the respondent genuinely wanted \$0 to be allocated to that area).

Further, the volume of \$0 responses means that they dominate summary statistics, such as the average (by creating a large negative skew) and the mode (\$0 is the most frequent response).

The practical effect is that \$0 responses need to be considered separately from other responses. Understanding \$0 responses separately gives an insight into which areas students and HDR candidates want to see at least some money go toward and which they are willing to leave unfunded.

When \$0 responses are removed, the distributions of the remaining responses tends to show numerous low dollar responses and very few high dollar responses. The effect of this 'positive skew' is that the few high scores have a big impact on the average, making it much higher and less representative of the distribution of the range of values.

To overcome this, the remaining data are presented as quartiles, a technique for describing datasets where all the observations are ordered by value and divided into four equally sized sets (quarters) of observations. These 'quartiles' of the distribution that capture and report 25%, 50% (or the 'median') and 75% of the responses. In this context, this gives a sense of the variation in responses within and across each area. Taking the dollar values that represent the middle 50% of responses (those that fit between the 25% and 75% points) is known as the "interquartile range". The median represents the exact middle point, where half of all responses are above, and half are below, that dollar value.

In practice, this approach gives a good sense of how much or little variation there is in student and HDR candidate responses by comparing the interquartile ranges for each area. The median can be used as an indicator of the most representative dollar value across the responses, much like an average is used for data where the range of scores is not as skewed by the extreme values observed for the SSAF survey.

Examining Non-Response Bias

Non-response bias is an important part of understanding who responded. In any organisational survey, there are usually differences between responders and non-responders. Understanding whether there are differences and, if any, what those differences are is an important part of understanding the story of the survey.

The best way to measure non-response bias is to find non-respondents, ask them why chose not to respond and how they would have responded if they had. However, this is typically unfeasible for anonymous surveys such as this one. Instead, a sense of non-response bias can be taken from those who responded to the reminder, based on the principle that without the reminder, the majority of people who respond to the reminder would have been non-respondents. The method comes from mail surveys about how teachers used radios in the 1930s, where teachers who responded to the second and third mail outs used radios very differently (a lot less) to those who responded to the first mail out. The term 'wave' is used to describe different groups on the basis of when they choose to respond.

This method gives an indication of the direction rather than the magnitude of differences between respondents and non-respondents. That is, it is possible to get a sense of whether non-respondents are likely to be more positive or negative in their views than respondents without being able to say how much more positive or negative that difference is.

Analyses

The analytic approach taken first examines the proportion of \$0 responses by wave and demographic categories. This provides context for later examination of any variation in response distributions by wave, and then examining response distributions by the two demographic items.

To understand any differences on the basis of demographics, across categories, or both, the degree to which the median response for a category departs from \$10 has been explored. This is because if funds were to be allocated equally across all areas by all respondents, each area would be allocated exactly \$10

Findings

Response Volumes

A total of 1,801 students opened the survey link provided in the invitation e-mail, of which 1,281 provided valid and useable responses (4.6%). Forty two percent of responses came after the reminder (n=549).

Table 1 reports the proportion of respondents as degree type by study location. The largest single group of responders in the dataset are students living in Canberra and attending campus, either as undergraduates or HDR candidates (53.3% of all respondents). HDR candidates outside Australia represent the smallest group of respondents within the dataset. With this exception, there are enough respondents in every cell to get a sense of the range of responses for any group.

As an indicator of representativeness, Table 2 shows the proportion of students by degree type for both the mailing list and survey responses. Given the degree types for just over 10% of the mailing list are unknown, the proportion of each degree type is calculated as a proportion of known degree types (25,275). Just under 0.8% of the mailing list were non-award students.

The sample appears to comprise of proportionally more HDR candidates than might be expected based on the profile of the mailing list, with undergraduates more responsive to the reminder than people studying towards other degree types. The practical effect is that while combining post-graduate and HDR candidates approximates the population list, that combination has more HDR candidates than would be expected.

Beyond this rough indication, without more demographic data, it is impossible to say whether the sample is demographically or attitudinally representative of the ANU student community. Given only 4.6% of students invited responded, a conservative approach is taken that the responses reflect the sample rather than the population. Consequently, the findings of the survey are indicative of the views among those who chose to respond rather than the ANU student community generally.

\$0 Responses

\$0 Responses by Wave

Table 3 reports the proportion of \$0 responses for each item by wave. Noting that randomised presentation means there are no order effects, the findings can be understood using four bands in the proportion of \$0 responses; below 30% (green), mid-30% (yellow), mid-40% (salmon) and 50% (orange). Statistically significant differences (chi-squared, $p < 0.01$) are highlighted in bold.

As an indicator of support for each area, it seems that around three-quarters of students are willing to allocate at least some of the SSAF to health, welfare and well-being, and to student support and advice. By comparison, subgroups of students were divided in their willingness to use the SSAF to support student produced media and art.

There are significant differences between the proportion of \$0 responses before and after the reminder. Those responding after the reminder were more likely to leave \$0 responses in relation to support for new and returning students, general student support and advice, and health, welfare and well-being. This suggests that non-respondents would be less inclined to support these three areas, although it is unclear whether that would be sufficient to, for example, see the proportion of \$0 responses above 50% for "support for new and returning students".

\$0 Responses by Degree Type

As can be seen in Table 3, there is variation in the proportion of \$0 responses by degree type. Students are consistent in how they responded to the areas of health, welfare and well-being, student support and advice, essential study skills and sporting and recreation, with the *health* and the *support* categories given at least some funding by most students.

The most striking pattern of differences is that post-graduate students and HDR candidates are significantly less likely to allocate SSAF to clubs and societies, to student produced art and to advocacy. HDR candidates also appear less inclined to see SSAF directed to support new and returning students and career-related support. Perhaps unsurprisingly, undergraduate and post-graduate students are more likely to provide a \$0 response to HDR support and research skills.

This pattern of responses confirms that the activities, supports and services that undergraduates want to see funded are different to those post-graduates and HDR candidates want funded.

\$0 Responses by Location

A clear pattern in the responses is that respondents located in Australia (in Canberra or elsewhere) diverged from those outside Australia in terms of allocating money to activities. Those outside Australia were less likely to leave a \$0 response (so conversely, more likely to allocate money) to student clubs and societies, to support for new and returning students, to career support and study skills. They were

less likely to fund advocacy and representation, seen in the larger relative proportion of \$0 responses. Students in Australia but outside of Canberra also were less likely to provide a \$0 response to support for new and returning students. Taken together, this might be interpreted as those outside Canberra, but especially those outside of Australia looking for opportunities to connect with and return to the ANU community.

The finding that 50% of in-Canberra, off-campus respondents made no allocation to HDR/research skills is perhaps a reflection that only 14.8% of this group were HDR candidates (compared with 22.5% and 20.6% of the other groups of respondents in Australia). For students outside Australia, it is worth noting that while 14.3% were HDR candidates, 50.0% were post-graduates, which may have influenced the finding.

Allocations

Allocations for the Total Sample

Figure 1 shows that the summary measure of the distribution of all responses – the median - tends towards \$10, which shows respondents want relatively equal funding across most areas. The only exceptions to this are with *health* and *support*. Interquartile ranges below \$10 suggest respondents may be willing to tolerate relatively lower funding for an area (e.g. student produced media and art). Conversely, interquartile ranges above \$10 suggest equal funding would be acceptable, but a higher proportion of funding may be appropriate (e.g. advocacy and representation). The mix of ranges above and below \$10 may give an indication of what trade-offs might be acceptable to students in pursuit of how SSAF could be allocated across areas.

Allocations by Wave

Figure 2 shows little departure from the \$10 median across the categories as a function of wave. It is clear that students are willing to allocate more to health (median \$15) and student support (\$20 and \$18, respectively) across the waves, without compensation below the \$10 threshold in any other area. The only difference between the two waves is for the area of advocacy and representation, with students responding to the reminder allocating slightly more (\$15) than those responding before the reminder (\$10). This is an artefact of the distribution rather than a meaningful difference, with 48.2% of post-reminder responses sitting at or below \$10.

Allocations by Degree Type

While the \$10 threshold is maintained across most areas, there is some variation in the value of funds allocated by degree type (see Figure 3). In terms of consistent departure from the \$10 threshold regardless of degree type, *health* and *support* are generally given above the \$10 threshold and student produced media and art a lower \$5-10.

Three specific differences that relate to degree type emerge. The first is that undergraduates who responded appear inclined to allocate more to clubs and societies. The second is that responding post-graduates are slightly more concerned with funding employment and career support. Finally, HDR candidates in the sample clearly have a strong self-interest in relation to research skills.

Allocations by Study Location

The pattern emphasising the two areas of *health* and *support* repeats across study locations (see Figure 4). Beyond this emphasis, there is very little variation away from the \$10 median or the interquartile range for any of the other areas. The only apparent variation is employability and careers for students in Canberra but off-campus. Given this group is made up of approximately equal numbers of undergraduates and post-graduates/HDR candidates such that no degree type dominates, observed patterns may result from other factors, such as this group comprising of later year students preparing to graduate during or at the end of 2021.

Implications

The findings indicate that students prioritise “health, welfare and well-being” (median for all responses \$15) and “student support and advice” (\$20) as the two areas where they are willing to disproportionately allocate more of their SSAF contribution. The remaining areas would be funded equally (\$10).

In terms of resource allocation, the findings offer two interpretations. The first is that students would like to see funding increase to 135% of current levels. There may be value in exploring where such a funding increase might come from, whether from an increase in SSAF paid by students, fund raising activities by students, or some other means (noting the financial constraints arising from COVID realised in 2020 and expected 2021-2023).

The second, more achievable interpretation, is the proportional allocation of resources. For example, the findings suggest that students would prefer to see 11% of funds going to “health, welfare and well-being”, 15% to “student support and advice” and 9% each to each of the remaining eight areas.

Among the areas asked of students, it seems that student produced media and art is the area that students appear most willing to leave unfunded or receiving relatively lower funding. Consequently, there may be scope to negotiate diverting allocation for this area to the two priorities consistently identified by students.

The other area that offers scope for negotiation is how to fund “HDR/research skills”. The findings show that diverting funds to this is clearly of less interest to coursework students than HDR candidates. This suggests that there is scope to negotiate how best to allocate SSAF across different student groups, with slightly different priorities for HDR candidates and coursework students. This will require negotiation between stakeholders to find an acceptable allocation that meets the apparently different needs of students and candidates.

Future SSAF Surveys

The next iteration of the ANU SSAF survey might usefully look to use an alternative approach for measuring student allocation preferences and trade-offs among the areas of services, supports and activities. The constant sum question used raised methodological challenges (the \$0 missing response). Another approach is the ‘best-worst’ scaling method that would allow students to identify which area they feel is the most and least important for SSAF to fund. This would identify a clear priority list.

Another issue is that the SSAF items tend to be campus-centric. While an obvious challenge arises from the proportion of students who are “off-campus”, the questions failed to provide nuance around how the SSAF might be allocated to improve student access to the ANU community. Expanding the list to include areas relevant to studying away from campus (e.g. resolving the ‘digital divide’), students with a disability and/or diverse socio-economic backgrounds may provide greater insights into how students wish to make allocations.

While the mailing list used for this iteration of the SSAF survey meant there was no sampling bias, it does raise the issue of whether the survey should be sent only to students paying the SSAF. It is unclear how many “inactive” students responded to this survey or whether they respond differently to other “active” students, making the level of potential bias introduced in this survey unknown. That said, the bias is likely to be trivial (e.g. the number of inactive students using their ANU e-mail accounts) and more likely to improve face validity than make a substantive difference to the integrity of the data collection.

Table 1: Volume and Percentage of Respondents by Degree Type and Study Location

	CBR, On	CBR, Off	Not CBR	Not Aus	Total
Undergraduate	509 (39.5%)	139 (10.9%)	77 (6.0%)	35 (2.7%)	757 (59.1%)
Post-Graduate	101 (7.9%)	69 (5.4%)	46 (3.6%)	49 (3.8%)	265 (20.7%)
HDR	177 (13.8%)	36 (2.8%)	32 (2.5%)	14 (1.1%)	259 (20.2%)
Total	784 (61.2%)	244 (19.0%)	155 (12.1%)	98 (7.7%)	1,281 (100.0%)

Table 2: Proportion of Students by Degree Type for the Mailing List and Survey

	Mailing List	Pre-Reminder	Post-Reminder	Total
Undergraduate	54.6%	55.8%	63.6%	59.1%
Post-Graduate	33.9%	21.6%	19.5%	20.7%
HDR	10.8%	22.6%	16.9%	20.2%

Table 3: Proportion of \$0 Responses by Reminder, Degree Type and Location

	Pre	Post	UG	PG	HDR	CBR, On	CBR, Off	Not CBR	Not Aus	Total
Health, welfare & well-being	25%	30%	27%	27%	25%	28%	27%	24%	26%	27%
Student support & advice	21%	27%	23%	23%	24%	24%	22%	21%	27%	23%
Clubs & societies	34%	38%	29%	42%	50%	35%	40%	37%	30%	36%
Student produced media & art	48%	52%	45%	53%	58%	48%	53%	50%	54%	50%
Support new & returning students	42%	50%	44%	42%	53%	48%	47%	39%	34%	45%
Employability, English, careers & volunteer	31%	34%	30%	31%	40%	34%	31%	33%	24%	33%
Essential study skills	40%	45%	43%	40%	44%	45%	39%	40%	36%	43%
Advocacy and representation	34%	35%	27%	43%	43%	31%	37%	35%	45%	34%
Sporting & recreation	44%	45%	43%	46%	46%	44%	46%	46%	42%	44%
HDR/research skills	43%	47%	54%	48%	16%	44%	50%	44%	40%	45%

Figure 1: Interquartile Range and Median for Allocations by the Total Sample

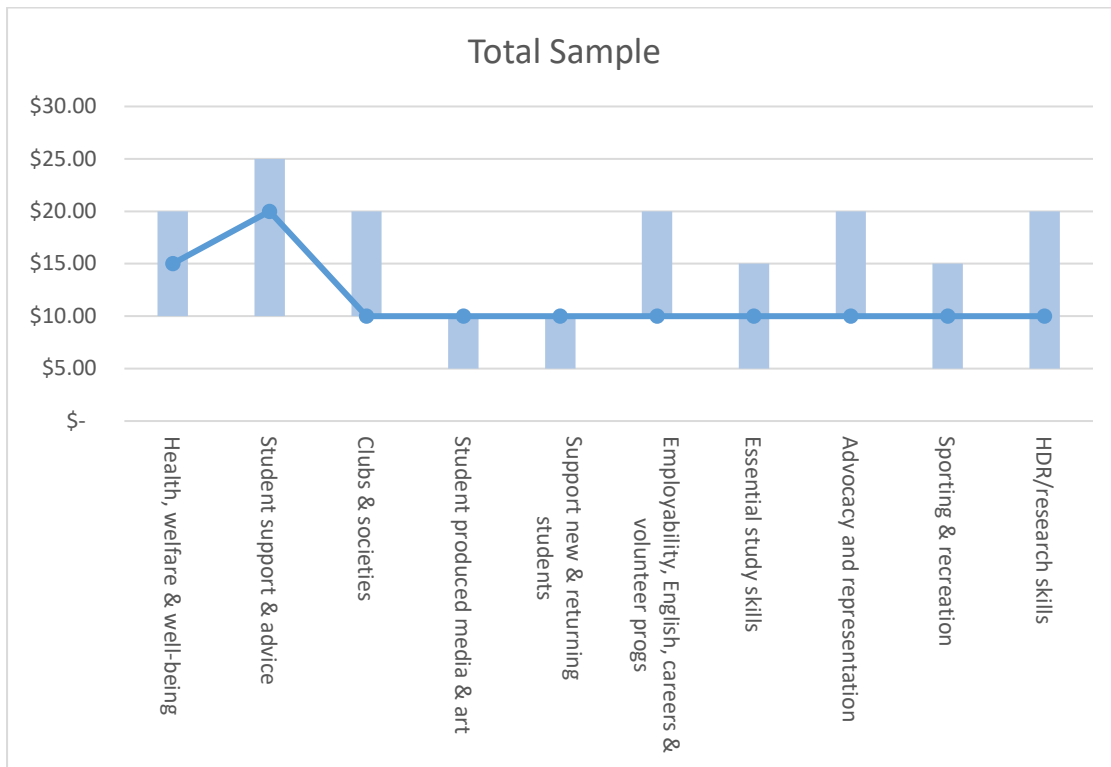


Figure 2: Interquartile Range and Median for Pre and Post-Reminder Allocations

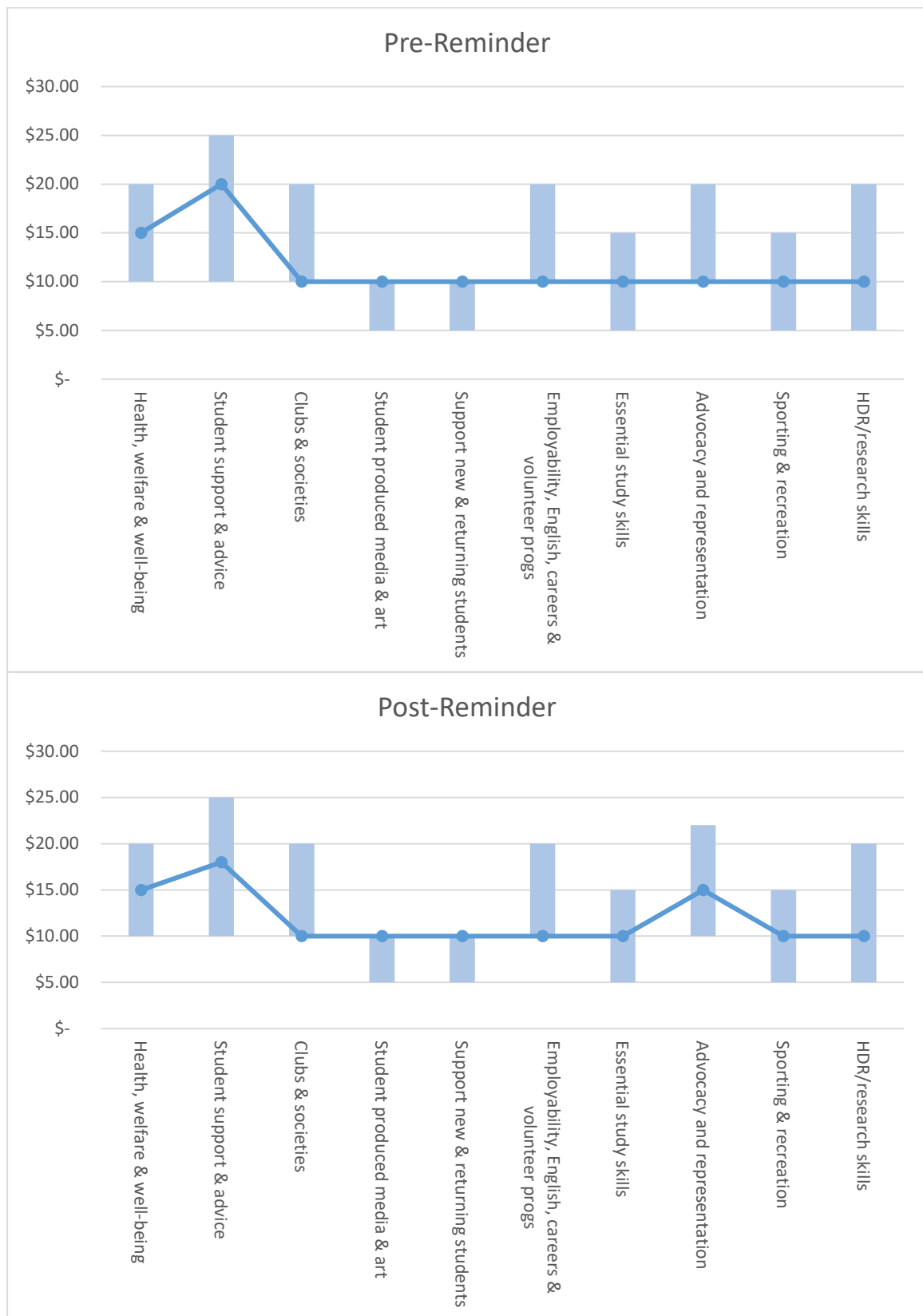


Figure 3: Interquartile Range and Median for Allocations by Degree Type

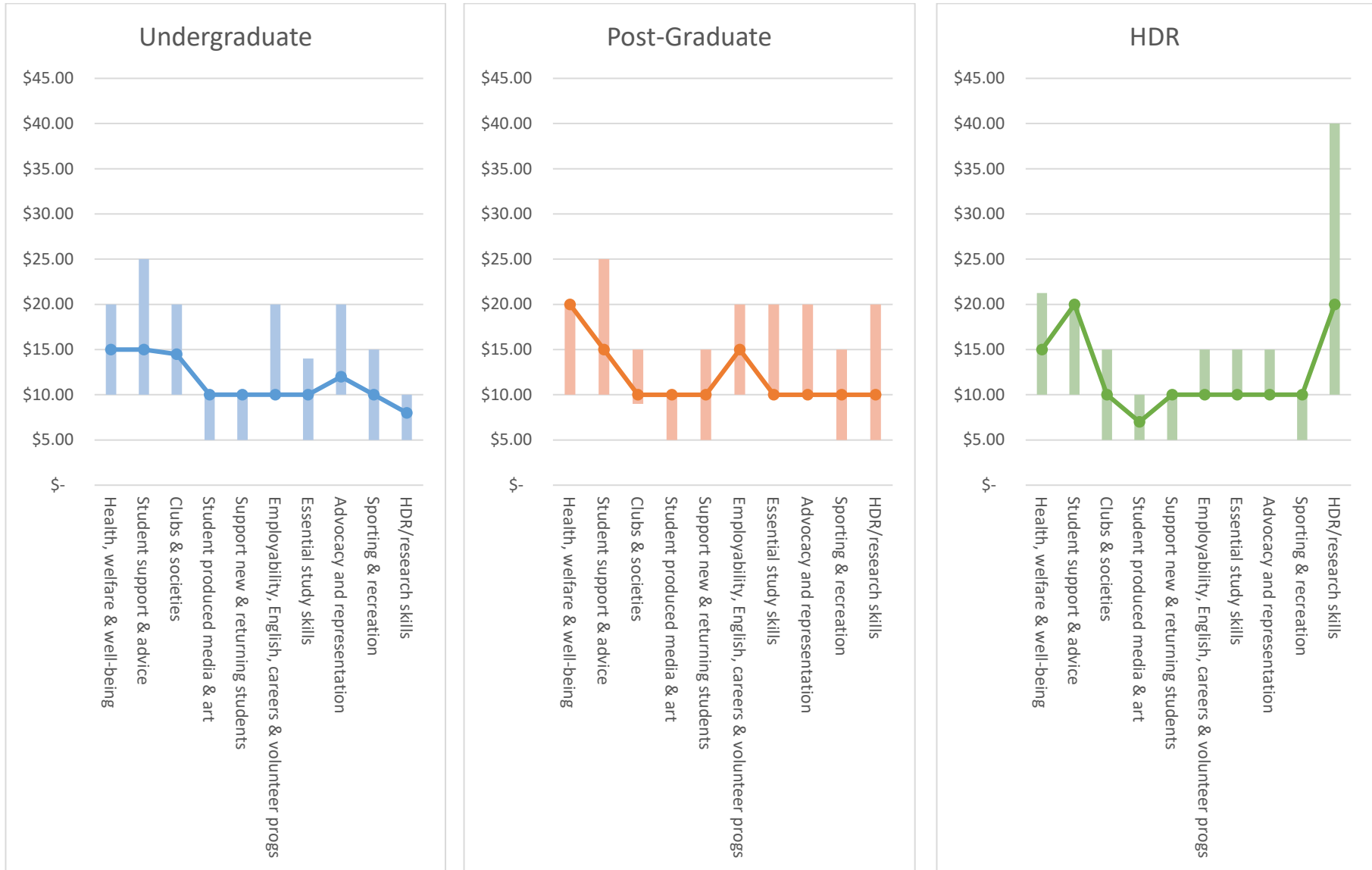


Figure 4: Interquartile Range and Median by Study Location

