

2020 STUDENT SERVICES AND AMENITIES FEES SURVEY REPORT

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. Valid responses were analysed 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.

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. Compared to the profile of mailing list, the sample had a slightly higher proportion of undergraduates (59% vs 55%), a lower proportion of post-graduate coursework students (21% vs 35%) and a higher proportion of HDR candidates (11% vs 20%).

Analytic Approach

The analytic approach undertaken here accounts for \$0 as a default response. 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). As a consequence, they are removed from the distribution of responses given the aim to understand the distribution of allocations.

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.

Analyses

The analytic approach examines the proportion of \$0 responses by demographic categories. To understand any differences on the basis of demographics, 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. Given only 4.6% of students invited responded, a conservative approach is taken that the responses reflect the sample rather than the population.

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 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 2). 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 3). 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.

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

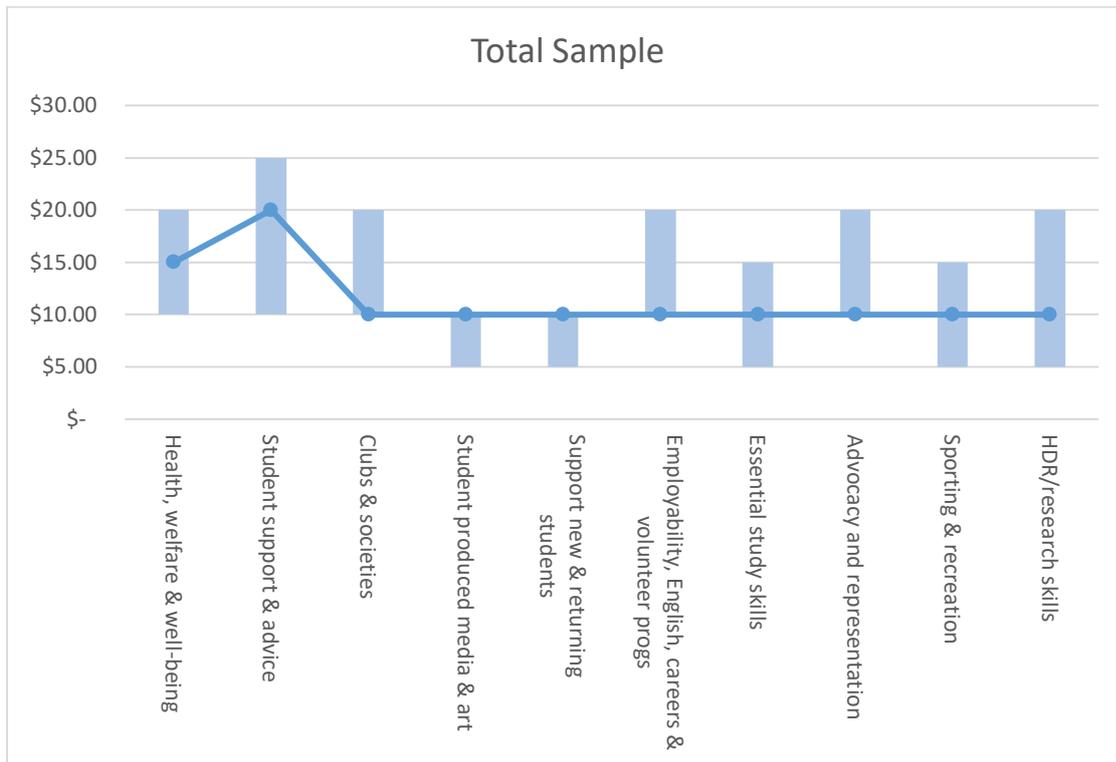


Figure 2: Interquartile Range and Median for Allocations by Degree Type



Figure 3: Interquartile Range and Median by Study Location

