

THE WELLBEING
of ARCHITECTS
culture, identity
+ practice.

The Wellbeing of Architects
Report on Focus Groups
with Students



Colophon

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Introduction

For further information on the student survey completed in 2021, please see the primary report here: <https://thewellbeingofarchitects.org.au/the-wellbeing-of-architects-2021-student-survey-primary-report>

This report presents the findings of a series of focus groups conducted with students studying architecture in April 2022. The topic of discussion was how their wellbeing was affected by their study.

Themes that emerged out of these sessions included studio culture - norms, expectations, pressure and passion; personal concessions and sacrifice; equity and empathy; identity and affiliation; independence and support; autonomy and growth; and self-comparison. There were also broader explorations of structural processes, models and support mechanisms, as well as suggestions for improving wellbeing for students of architecture.

The focus groups were part of a larger research project Architectural Work Cultures: Professional Identity, Education and Wellbeing (LP190100926), funded by the Australian Research Council between 2020 and 2023. Within the broader project, a survey was conducted in 2021. The student survey provided a baseline of qualitative and quantitative data regarding the experiences of students undertaking architectural education at tertiary institutions. The student survey in September 2021 followed a practitioner survey aimed at professionals working in the architectural industry. Together, those surveys, plus subsequent practitioner, student and academic focus groups look to interrogate a whole-of-life journey of wellbeing of architects, with further surveys to be conducted in 2023.

The focus groups, conducted in 2022, aimed to interrogate the findings of the 2021 student survey in greater detail, allowing a small number of participants to elaborate on their lived experiences. The semi-structured questions asked students to reflect on how their studies impacted their wellbeing. The focus groups also asked for participants' suggestions for improving architecture students' wellbeing.

We acknowledge the generosity and engagement of the many members of the Australian architectural student community who contributed their time to participate in the focus groups.

Executive Summary

The focus group findings assert that there are areas of genuine concern for the wellbeing of higher education students within architectural disciplines. These findings also provide insight into the aspects of architectural studies that allow students to thrive and what might help improve the wellbeing of architectural students.

The participants were able to identify a range of aspects of their studies that had a positive impact on their wellbeing. These broadly related to strong social cohorts and communities, individual autonomy and identity, and experiencing growth, self-actualisation and achievement. Participants wrestled with the tension between these aspects' producing both positive and negative outcomes for their wellbeing.

Social aspects and 'studio culture' constituted the core of students' expositions within the focus groups. The culture was pivotal in shaping their past experiences and presented opportunities for what might be done differently in the future.

Participants suggested that the community could be a source of support, inspiration and motivation but also serve as a stressor, sometimes prompting negative self-appraisal, fuelling anxiety and leading many students to become overwhelmed or exhausted by perceived pressure and expectations.

The focus groups provided a space for participants to dive into the complexities of studying architecture students illustrated how cultural factors morphed into experiences that were more or less positive, depending on a myriad of contexts.

The students who participated in the focus groups expressed a desire for improved wellbeing for people who work and study in the architectural industry. Participants expressed a concern for barriers to wellbeing, whilst remaining optimistic that there was capacity to improve the culture of architecture in Australia.

About the Focus Groups

For further information on Ethics and Harm Minimisation, please see the Appendix on p. 27.

Recruitment

Participants were recruited via the larger research project's student survey conducted in 2021. The student survey was conducted online in September 2021. Eligibility required enrollment in an accredited Architectural Degree programme. Approximately 600 respondents completed the survey from across Australia.

The survey's final question provided an option to volunteer for a future focus group by submitting an email contact. This contact list of potential focus group participants was separated from their initial survey responses to ensure anonymity.

In March 2022, those who had volunteered to participate in the focus groups were invited to complete a preliminary questionnaire to gather basic demographic information (see About the Participants).

From this list, potential participants were provided with a plain language statement explaining the project and what their participation would mean and were invited to complete a scheduling tool indicating their availability. Once a time had been confirmed, they were also required to complete a consent form, agreeing to the terms of participation.

The project was approved by Monash University's Human Research Ethics Committee (Project id: 30496), and all respondents were assured of confidentiality and anonymity.

Structure & Questions

The focus groups used a semi-structured method with follow-up prompts as needed. The focus group commenced with an overview of the group's aims and ground rules. The focus group discussions entailed questions broadly falling into the following categories:

1. Aspects of architectural education that had positive impacts on wellbeing.
2. Aspects of architectural education that had negative impacts on wellbeing.
3. Suggestions for what could be done to improve wellbeing for students within the architectural disciplines.

About the Participants

There were four focus groups, held between April 4 and May 4. In total, 21 people participated in the focus groups. The focus groups were designed to be 'mixed', meaning that each would - as much as possible - include diverse representation. The variables included in screening included: state/territory, current degree enrolment (both bachelors and masters, as well as single and double degrees), domestic or international student status, part-time and full-time course loads, prior years of study, enrolled university, and gender. Despite the small sample size of focus group participants, the focus groups appeared to be indicative and reflective of the broader trends evinced within the prior survey, and collected a variety of personal lived experiences that helped to contextualise findings.

The demographics of the focus group participants were, in general, reflective of the participants of our survey.

Beyond demographic information identified within the screening questionnaire, the following factors were pertinent in shaping the views and lived experiences explored by the focus group participants:

- Employment status
- Age & prior study/work experience
- Financial support & constraints
- Social support & constraints
- Physical & mental health experiences
- Access to resources
- Independence & self-efficacy

Figure 1.

Gender of participants.

This indicates a skew towards women (65%), which was also present in the 2021 survey cohort (comprised of 67% female, 31% male and 2% non-binary/transgender persons)

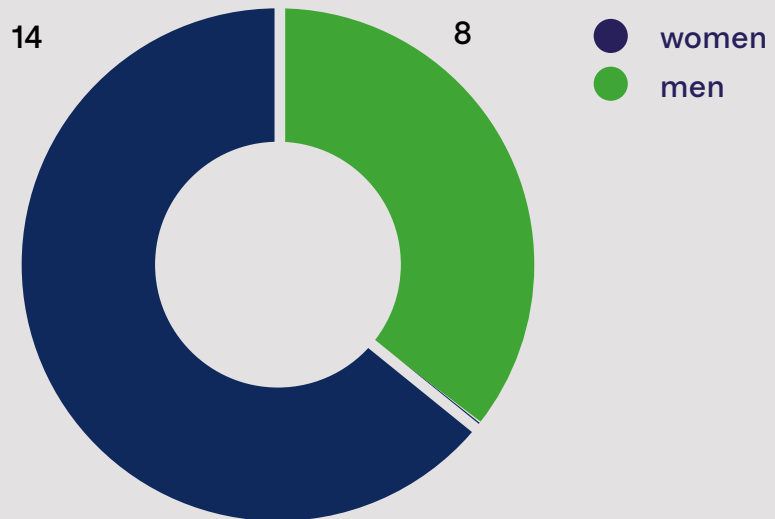


Figure 2.

Enrolment Status.

This indicates a skew towards domestic (82%) students, which was also present in the 2021 survey cohort (comprised of 81% domestic students and 19% international students)

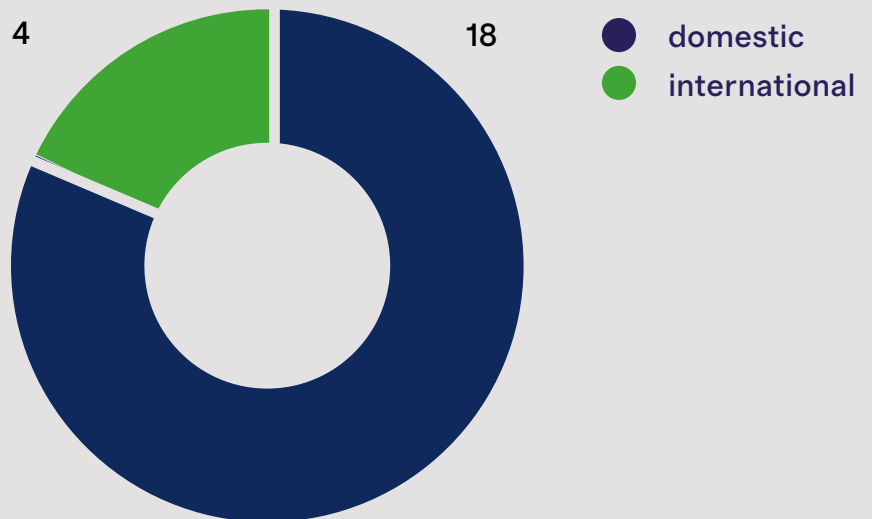


Figure 3.

Study Load.

This indicates a skew towards full-time students (68%), present also within the 2021 survey cohort, to a slightly lesser significance (with 83% respondents full-time and 17% part-time).

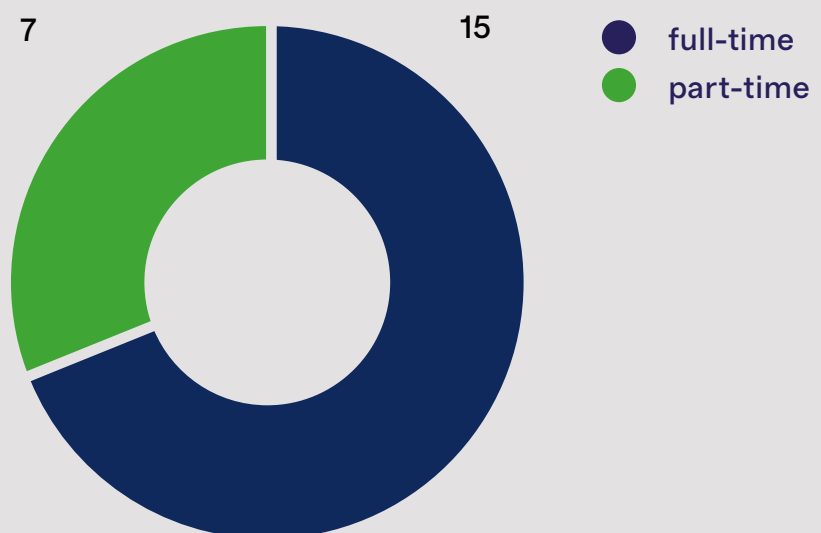


Figure 4.

Current Degree.

This indicates a skew towards Masters students (64%), which diverges from the 2021 student survey cohort (which broadly speaking comprised equally of Bachelors and Masters students)

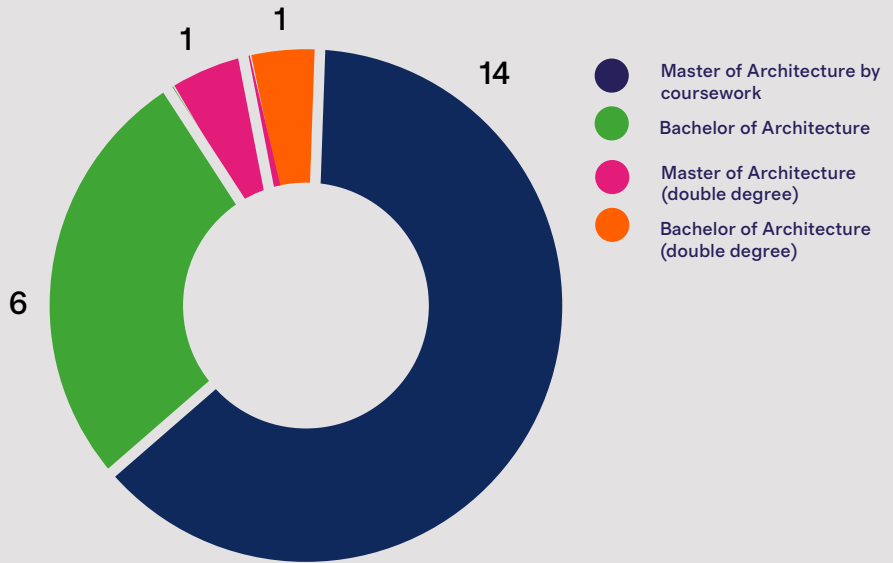


Figure 5.

Years Studying.

This indicates a skew towards students towards the end of their studies.

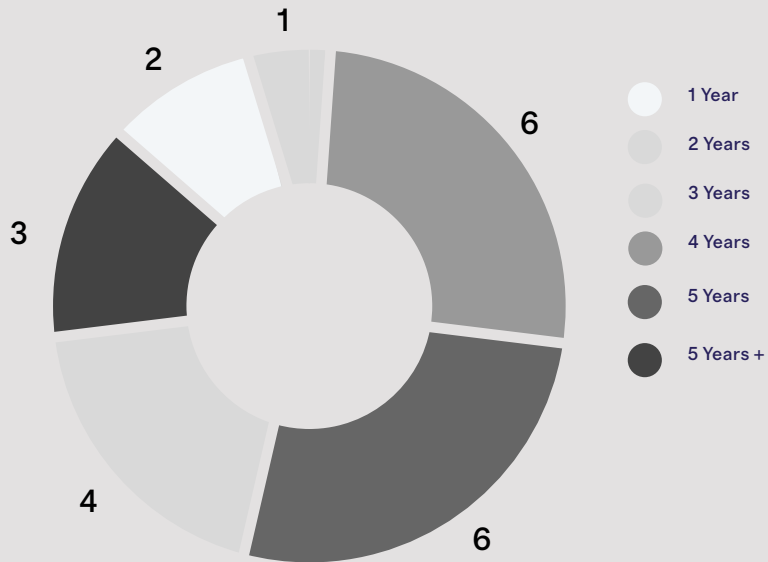
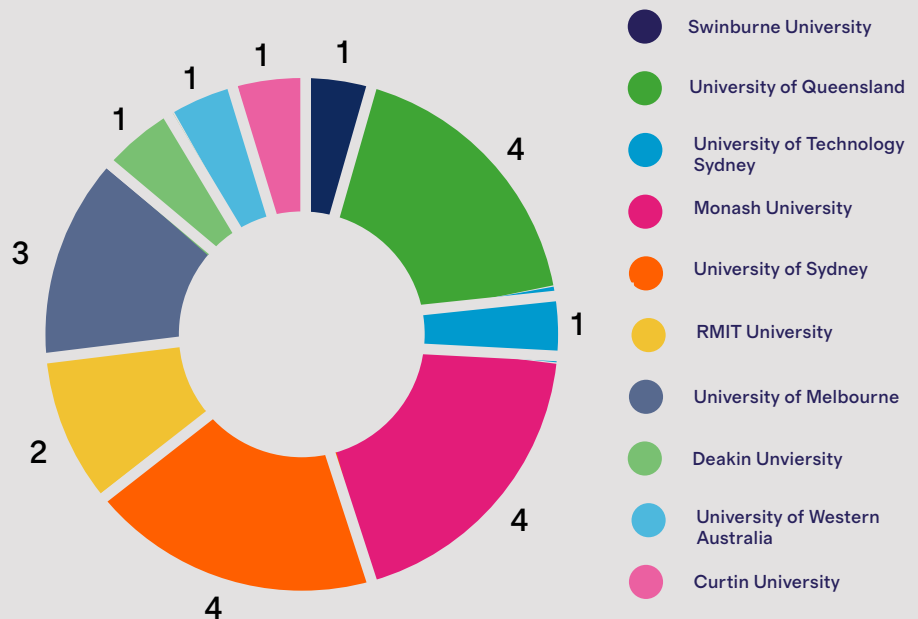


Figure 6.

University where Enrolled.

This indicates the universities attended by our focus group participant sample.



Focus Group Findings

Report Structure

This section reports the findings from the focus groups and is structured around ten key themes broadly emerging from focus group discussion.

Broadly emergent themes:

1. Workload
2. Pace
3. Sustainability
4. Fairness
5. Culture
6. Belonging
7. Guidance
8. Assessment
9. Achievement
10. Actualisation

Between the thematic sections, there is some overlap. Within the discussions, participants noted that impacts on wellbeing were frequently the product of multiple interconnected factors instead of a single factor in isolation.

Workload: Getting Things Done

“Submissions can sometimes get insane with the amount of deliverables that are being asked of each week.”

“I found myself thinking that I could go to bed, theoretically, but I could also do better if I just keep going for a bit longer. And maybe if I put in more work, I'll be as good as that person who sits next to me most weeks in studio. It's a feedback loop, everyone sees work that they think is better than theirs, and think 'I'll have to put in a few more hours'.”

“The work that's produced and the amount of learning that occurs within a year is phenomenal. I think about when I first start my first year and what I knew then compared to what I know now, and it really does feel like a lot is being taught to us, and that I am getting a lot out of the course that I'm doing.”

“As I got further into the course I became more aware of a culture of stress and overworking, and all-nighters. The workload gets to a point where it's insane. I remember times at which I really, really struggled to find the balance between uni and the life that existed outside of my degree. It felt like I had to sacrifice a lot of my social life, and other aspects of my wellbeing for this course, which was frustrating because I love this course.”

Challenges

- Uncertainty regarding what constitutes a reasonable workload
- Feeling pressured to output a high volume of work
- Being overwhelmed and unable to manage levels of stress
- Feeling a low sense of control over workload
- Complex and challenging deliverables
- Difficulty setting reasonable boundaries
- Sustaining workload intensity for the duration of study

Benefits

- Flexibility to pursue areas of personal interest
- Finding more efficient ways of working
- Developing specialist skills and proficiencies
- Improving the quality of work produced
- Exploring different disciplines, processes and modes of practice
- Exposure to a lot of interesting and engaging content

Tensions

Participants expressed complex relationships with the effects of workload on their wellbeing. Workload complexity and breadth could cause stress and exhaustion, but also motivated participants to rapidly improve their skills, explore and hone areas of interest and expand knowledge.

Participants noted that uncertainty in understanding appropriate workloads could lead to overwork. Participants detailed experiences in which they had reallocated the time they might otherwise spend sleeping or maintaining their wellbeing, on their university work instead.

Participants' appraisal of workload was often framed around experiences of the critique model and presenting in class. Presentations to peers and tutor(s) could compound intensity, producing both negative and positive impacts. Whilst presentations could increase stress to the point of students feeling overwhelmed and exhausted, participants also expressed a sense of pride in looking at the results of the passion and commitment within the class.

"I know that going to industry events are important, and will help my career, but I feel like my workload is so heavy that I can't make time to attend those kind of things"

"Going from full-time to part-time made my workload a lot easier to manage. I was suprised at how much it reduced my stress"

"So many students are willing to go above and beyond the normal 40 hours a week workload. I think it would be helpful if teachers could recommend some advice for satisfying course requirements and then also undertaking the self-education aspect"

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Introduce training and guidance to assist academic staff in better understanding the amount of work students are able to achieve within a given time frame, appropriate to their level of study
- Promote opportunities for peer-to-peer mentoring
- Recognise that students can benefit from diversity in teaching staff and exposure to a broader range of the ways in which architecture can be practiced

Teaching staff

- Make time to discuss workload and help students to set reasonable goals and expectations
- Monitor students who are struggling and, where appropriate, direct them to further support
- Encourage students to work collaboratively

Individuals

- Communicating with peers and tutors and realistically adjusting expectations
- Working with peers to exchange skills and knowledge proficiency
- Exploring opportunities available to align interests and studies

Pace: Keeping Up

"I think the biggest difference between students that were thriving (and not always in the most healthy ways) were those students that had found a way to get things done quickly"

"I've got peers outside of this degree who front load their semester, know all of their deliverables, and that they need to achieve X thing for their assignment and it's not going to negatively impact them. Whereas half of the rubrics in architecture include the need to demonstrate evidence of an iterative process. Because of that criteria, the need to produce doesn't stop until submission, the day on the line - that's the basis of the course..."

"It's all in our additional hours in the week that we need to fit it in and we're already trying to do a studio production or you know another thing and we've also got to teach ourselves a project and program. And, you know, as an undergrad I just found... My friends have asked me, 'Oh how did you learn to use that,' and I just have to say 'Oh, I sat down with a few other people' and I'll show them and we'll all work it out"

Challenges

- Fast-paced environment
- Intense environment
- Iterative nature of deliverables
- Pressure to develop skills and hone outcomes in tandem

Benefits

- Rapid improvement of skills, progress and growth
- Intense environment
- Satisfaction at level of work completed
- Exposure to a wide range of competencies in a short timeframe
- Developing a more interesting project

Tensions

Participants expressed that the pace of work had a significant bearing on their wellbeing. The fast pace was often connected to a sense of intensity and community engagement and produced a complex mix of positive and negative pressure.

Participants noted that students who had learned how to do their work more quickly generally did better, had more control over their workload, and had more time to do other things. Students who could find ways to make their output more efficient earlier in their studies were often perceived to have an advantage. Students noted that the ability to work more quickly often improved over their course. Students could develop their efficiency through peer learning and exchanging tips and tricks that allowed them to work faster.

Participants expressed an underlying tension between keeping up with core weekly deliverables and building their skillset so that they could generally work faster. Reflecting on their experiences, participants noted that discovering (and sharing) better ways of doing things could often be a point of immense satisfaction. Conversely, others reflected that there was a risk of becoming overwhelmed and stressed due to frustration at being unable to complete a task as quickly or competently as one's peers.

“The more you try, the more iterations you do, the more interesting your project can be, but I think I sometimes get to a point where it’s like I can’t think of anything more because I’m so stressed about what I need to get done.”

“Something that takes like five hours for one student to do might take 10 hours for another student to do. I feel that a better way to approach that kind of problem is to standardize or better standardize the way you expect students to approach it”

“My university has tried to reduce the required workload. I think it’s helped reduce people’s stress levels a bit”

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Introduce training and guidance for staff to build time management capabilities
- Encourage subject leaders to co-ordinate with their peers when scheduling assessments
- Encourage staff to communicate with each other and maintain a level of consistency in regards to conveying expectations to students

Teaching staff

- Teach students time management strategies
- Help students to understand and manage deadlines
- Convey to students how expectations differ between iterative process based work and final outcomes
- Encourage students to share strategies that allow work to be completed more efficiently

Individuals

- Communicating with peers and tutors and realistically adjusting expectations
- Working with peers to exchange skills and knowledge proficiency
- Exploring opportunities available to align interests and studies

Sustainability: Finding a Rhythm

“When there’s so much to do you kind of quickly scribble something down and then you move on to the next thing. Then, after rushing through the deliverables, you hit a crossroads where it’s midnight and there’s class at 9am. ‘Do I stay up and make these better or do I just bring in what I managed to get done for each thing?’

You start just getting enough done for each of these deliverables because there are so many or they’re so detailed. At that crossroads you need to assess: ‘Is this enough, or do I keep working?’”

“I was freaked out, thinking ‘is this sustainable?’ - I remember talking to some people in first year at the time, and I was saying that this is how I felt, and one of my friends was kind of looked at me he was like, ‘How do you think you’re going to do, five years of this, if this is how you’re feeling in your first year?’ And I remember thinking like, ‘I really want to do this course, but the idea that I have to go through this for the next four or five years scares the life out of me, because it’s just like not how I want to remember like this period of my life.’”

“We had students passing out because they weren’t eating they weren’t sleeping and then the pressure - and that’s first year, first semester”

Challenges

- Finding time and space to step back and evaluate stress
- Knowing when to stop working on something and move on
- Working out how much time to spend on specific deliverables versus developing skills and knowledge
- Sustaining effort over the course of a semester, course, or degree
- Feeling pressure to always work at a high level of intensity
- Iterative nature of the degree

Benefits

- Developing new ways of working that better support wellbeing
- Encouraging peers to establish healthier boundaries
- Finding a routine that keeps stress under control
- Developing the ability to put things into perspective
- Iterative nature of the degree

Tensions

Participants expressed uncertainty regarding delivering a sustained output. Beyond managing the day-to-day requirements of their studies, participants spoke to broader anxieties about continuing to produce work consistently over a semester, or their degree, without burning out. Participants noted that managing stress was critical in sustaining creativity.

Students reflected that establishing boundaries around time management could effectively decrease stress while maintaining output. In general, students who had been at university longer felt that they were better able to manage this. Participants contrasted their early experiences at university and felt that the pressure to prove themselves was a rite of passage conditional to their acceptance within the community.

Some participants felt that studio culture had protective mechanisms to their wellbeing in relation to sleep hygiene, and felt that working together with their peers - face-to-face, at university, allowed them to more clearly see how they were doing, and felt that their peers would help to signal when it was time to leave. Other participants felt that Covid-19 and online learning had been a positive catalyst for maintaining a more balanced outlook and practice.

“Our brains work neurologically much better when we’re not deeply stressed, so we actually have ability to be creative”

“People would bring sleeping bags into uni was kind of seen as a bit of a rite of passage that tutors inadvertently encouraged. Once, I pulled a double all nighter and I started smelling colours, had uncontrollable spasms and ended up in hospital. I didn’t even get an extension on my work”

“What I had to do, essentially, was under-load the first semester of 2020 and it was the first time I just did electives and my studio. Studio was the main thing that was stressing me out and going part-time lead to a much better semester... doing a Masters elective and just taking time off, because of how badly the previous semester had affected me from the lack of sleep and, essentially, I had eczema as a child, but it came back completely like everywhere, because of my immune system literally fighting itself.”

“...It was almost like getting to Masters, part-time was a reward that you had made it that far”

“In my early days at uni, I struggled with perfectionism and would put far too much time into things that weren’t worthwhile. Like doing things that weren’t even going to be visible when I printed. Time management is something that you get better at”

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Discussing with teaching staff how to encourage students to work sustainably over the course of the teaching period
- Monitoring culture and overwork and ensuring that students aren’t working in unhealthy ways

Teaching staff

- Promoting steady, consistent work from students
- Recognising that students might not produce their best work every week
- Encouraging students to maintain regular sleep cycles and look after other basic health needs

Individuals

- Reflecting on how to work on consistent improvement whilst maintaining basic needs
- Encouraging peers to put their university work into perspective, and look after their health

Fairness: Negotiating Difference

“In my first year, I remember one of my lecturers speaking to a student and asking ‘why haven’t you got enough work’ and the student said ‘I’ve got to work’. In response, the staff member said ‘you shouldn’t be working. You need study to be your full time job.’ In terms of hours, she was correct. It’s technically a 40 hour week if you’re doing a full-time course load. That being said, we need a culture shift in teaching staff recognising that in this day-and-age, many students lack the luxury or the privilege, to just study, rather than balancing it with work.”

“As an undergrad, I remember that no one really did part-time. Everyone I knew was full-time and it wasn’t something that was widely visible, or advocated for. It was taken for granted that ‘in this the degree we do full-time - you’re expected to be here for this many hours..’, and they explicitly recommended to us not to work at the same time.”

“ I think the university could put more effort into offering more stuff outside of the regular curriculum times so that you can shuffle the loads of units around or even... maybe offering credits for people who work in practices or do internships or something like that”

Challenges

- Balancing employment with study
- High cost of materials related to the course
- Pre-existing mental health factors
- Balancing care of dependents

Benefits

- Bringing previous life experience to the table
- Diverse perspectives
- Commitment to making positive social changes

Factors of note

- International students vs domestic students
- High cost of materials related to the course
- Living arrangements
- Financial security
- Age and stage of life

Tensions

Participants felt that some students were supported better than others in the course. There was a perception that students who lived at home, spoke English as a first language and were supported financially were at a substantial advantage. Students sometimes detailed difficult experiences in which teaching staff had unfairly dismissed their need to work and felt unfairly excluded.

Participants observed that other aspects of lived experience frequently compounded the need to juggle paid work and study. International students and older students were perceived to have further constraints around work and study, with some international students reporting reduced social support mechanisms, and older students often speaking to the need to care for dependents and going back to study after having periods of working full-time - struggling to maintain the drop in income and financial security.

Participants noted that international students often faced additional pressure, including cultural or language barriers, maintaining visas and distance from support systems.

"I knew someone who dropped out because they couldn't afford between the time commitment and their part-time job they couldn't afford to maintain. Like the materials required because a lot of model-making and whatnot. Some studios would tell you to expect costs of between \$200 to \$300 on materials and printing. And that was our number, if you were lucky. Then there were students, that would end up spending \$1000 on model materials."

"There seems to be a cultural lack of transparency and accountability, with the staff and students in architecture."

"I went from studying the first time to working for a few years and coming back to uni. I found the transition, really, really difficult, and very intense. They expect a lot of you, and they don't really tell you what that entails. You just kind of find out for yourself, but it's really intense."

Whilst participants framed negotiating differences primarily around 'fairness', there was also an acknowledgement of the benefits of having a diverse cohort. Participants recognised that different backgrounds informed design outcomes that broadened inclusivity and strengthened interdisciplinary thinking.

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Encourage an environment that promotes transparency and accountability
- Promote inclusion and diversity
- Provide opportunities for students to safely voice respectful concerns

Teaching staff

- Acknowledge that students may have other unavoidable commitments and try to avoid jumping to the conclusion that a student is simply disinterested or has a poor work ethic
- Promote an environment of trust and communication with students

Individuals

- Explore opportunities to access further support where appropriate
- Consider flexible study options if available

Culture: Collaboration & Competition

“It’s a close-knit environment where everyone is passionate about the same things. When I talk to my other friends about their uni experience, they feel like their tutors and lecturers and staff are all so far away [whereas within architecture], they’re all so approachable”

“For me, personally and culturally, the most valuable experiences come from the collaborative environments within my university, including the tutors. It’s something I find really exciting and it does inspire me in relation to architecture and I’m learning a lot from it”

“...In this course, everyone is giving 110% all of the time... I’ve never seen a collective group of people care so much about the same thing”

Challenges

- Fear of judgement from peers and teaching staff
- Fear of not being able to keep up with expectation and pressure
- Perception that competition is encouraged between students

Benefits

- Highly social environment
- Sharing work with others
- Enjoying seeing the work of others
- Opportunities to establish strong relationships
- Close engagement with tutors, lecturers and staff
- Perception that collaboration is encouraged between students
- Shared sense of passion

Tensions

Participants framed studio culture as central to architectural education.

Learning relationships and other informal social mechanisms were inextricably linked to wellbeing, knowledge acquisition and skillset growth.

Participants noted that formal learning relationships beyond the classroom vitally assisted students in meeting and exceeding the knowledge and skills required to do well. Participants observed that peer collaboration helped to bridge the gap between in-class teaching and assessment expectations. The value of collaboration also extended to relationships between students and those who taught them. Participants reflected on collaborative environments and events as a source of inspiration, motivation and engagement in learning.

At a neutral level, participants generally appraised their level of ‘success’ in their studies in terms of measuring the work of their peer cohort against their own.

Participants felt that some tutors and lecturers encouraged a competitive environment that pitted individual students against each other. Participants reflected that they experienced a heightened sense of discomfort and fear of judgement after witnessing or experiencing teaching staff criticise students as individuals rather than critiquing work.

“In my interview for the Bachelors' course, one of the staff members interviewing said what was it something along the lines of, ‘say goodbye to your friends’”

“We should spend time teaching first years how to think critically, how to do an oral presentation in a in a fun and light way. We need to promote understanding how to practice conflict management. How to communicate, and understand diversity, prepare them for the diverse range of people they'll need to talk to in practice.”

“Before Covid, studying at uni was really helpful for me. My friends would give me a nudge when it was time to move on from something. Or if my skills were lacking, people would help me out. And I'd do the same for my mates as well. The pandemic has really impacted being able to do that”

Within these discussions, students expressed a desire for studio culture to shift from encouraging competitive behaviours to embracing a more collaborative educational environment, where students were encouraged to support and learn from each other rather than have their relationship framed in adversarial terms.

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Encourage staff to explore the benefits of collaborative behaviour
- Recognise staff who facilitate strong collaborative environments

Teaching staff

- Encourage collaboration between students
- Avoid making personal comparisons between students that diminish some people at the expense of others

Individuals

- Contribute to a culture of collaboration rather than competition, support your peers

Belonging: Community & Identity

“The thing I’ve always liked most about studying architecture is that sense of belonging... I have a very deep passion for architecture and it’s great to be able to experience it with other people and talk to people who are as passionate about it as me.”

“You get to meet so many people and have so many different perspectives shown to you through those relationships and I feel like no other degree gets that”

“The culture can encourage people to neglect their health. I remember, in third year, our last assignment was in groups, and we were consistently working with just a few hours sleep. The day before the task was due people were so tired that they were napping in the studio on office chairs and we were all taking turns waking each other up after 20 minutes.”

“Sometimes when you step back from it, you think ‘how is this encouraged?’ and ‘how is this normal?’ You wonder how it became standard for the culture to encourage people to completely neglect their health and wellbeing.”

“Without being exposed to knowing what uni students are like outside of architecture school sometimes, you just feel like it’s normal to be working at

Challenges

- Fear of judgement
- Fear of not working hard enough
- Fear of not producing enough work
- Fear of producing bad work
- Normalisation that sleep can and sometimes should be sacrificed in order to produce a higher quality or quantity of work
- Normalisation of high stress
- Insular culture

Benefits

- Close-knit community
- Highly motivated people
- Engaged and passionate environment
- Culture of exchanging skills and knowledge with peers
- An environment in which people share the same passion

Tensions

Participants expressed a complex relationship to belonging, community and identity within the focus groups. The intensity of architectural studies was perceived to help form strong and resilient relationships within the community. Relationships went beyond class groups, often including the broader cohort, ‘vertical’ relationships between cohorts and the academic staff.

Participants noted that community and belonging helped students develop their skills, access support and thrive in their studies. Participants acknowledged that the desire to belong to the community could also encourage students to adopt less helpful attitudes and encourage students to neglect their wellbeing.

Participants reflected that a fear of judgement from the community could be a source of significant stress. Whilst the passion and enthusiasm within the environment could be a powerful source of inspiration, participants noted that the intensity of the environment could be overwhelming when they needed more confidence in their abilities.

uni on your studies really late at night, all the time.”

“I find it questionable when architecture students start arguing with the university faculty for 24 access to the building, when it’s already open until 11pm. It’s crazy, compared to other disciplines, we accept these weird norms because of the culture”

“It’s interesting taking subjects with students from other disciplines and seeing the ways in which their working style is quite different from architecture students.”

Some participants noted that the intensity of studio culture and emphasis on working in the physical environment, often late at night, could detract from maintaining relationships outside the architectural community. Participants noted that this could sometimes further normalise overworking and affect self-esteem.

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Consider monitoring usage patterns of studio spaces
- Consider introducing cross-disciplinary learning opportunities

Teaching staff

- Remind students that they are able to form relationships and social connections outside of architecture

Individuals

- Maintaining relationships beyond the architecture community

Guidance: Freedom & Support

“When I’m immersed in a topic or subject or design process and I get to just kind of disappear and explore and be really curious about something and have the freedom to do a lot of learning, that’s where I get my enjoyment”

“Many subjects give you a broad scope to discover and move into spaces that you personally find interesting. You’re really able to manoeuvre into those areas of interest. You can choose how far you want to go deeper into a project or brief or an assignment or task. I enjoy that kind of freedom”

“I felt so out of my depth because it was so abstract. They kind of throw you in the deep end.. And they don’t teach it to you much, so it was like trying to get a handle of that and also actually produce something. I think people came from so many different skill levels and there was nothing kind of putting you up on the same equal playing field, in terms of being taught technical skills that allow everyone to have equal opportunity to thrive”

“When I think back to the main thing about finding joy, I think that the time I find most joy is when I’m given license and autonomy to research and create without risk of being wrong or reprimanded”

Challenges

- Feeling under-skilled and under-supported
- Feeling confused about what a task entails
- Fear that requests for support might be rejected by teaching staff
- Feeling overwhelmed by the amount of ways something might be done and not knowing where to start

Benefits

- Self-directed learning
- Learning from other students in the course
- Immersion in content
- Sense of freedom
- Ability to explore and build upon personal strengths

Tensions

Participants acknowledged that assessments often required students to demonstrate skills and knowledge not taught in a formal learning environment.

Participants framed the self-directed aspect primarily in two ways: freedom and support.

Reflecting on their experiences, some students elaborated on times they had felt empowered by the freedom to pursue and develop their interests. Other experiences impacted students in negative ways. Some students expressed a desire for further structure and support and felt that the lack of guidance had contributed to feeling overwhelmed and excluded.

Relationships with the subject matter and teaching staff added a further layer of complexity to participants’ reflections.

"[Online teaching has meant that] undergraduate students miss out on meeting masters students or students from different year levels, who have skills that younger students don't necessarily know that they are missing or that they can acquire to excel in their learning"

"The university should, to provide opportunities to students, so they can be a part of architectural education in the grander scheme of things."

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Review how to balance freedom and support when designing courses
- Consider establishing general out-of-class supports that support different learning styles
- Investigate the possibility of giving students opportunities to participate in peer mentor/mentee experiences

Teaching staff

- Monitor students who are really struggling and direct them to help

Individuals

- Explore different ways of learning
- Discuss with other students how they approach things

Assessment: Ambiguity & Subjectivity

“A lot of the assignments I’ve had to do have a really vague rubric and leave it very much up to the opinion of whoever is marking it, in terms of what grade you get. The first assignment I did first time was marked that I was going to pass, and the second part was marked by someone else and I got an HD which seems like a big difference...”

“I really enjoy moment where I’m falling down rabbit holes and immersed in the curiosity of learning is really strong. I like when doing that is encouraged in architecture. There’s definitely pros and cons, given it contributes to the expectation that we need to know about everything, but I think that freedom of learning is really powerful and it’s had a really positive impact for me”

“Nothing you ever do is enough, you don’t get to just call it a day... you can always just keep going”

“I’m sure everybody here has probably wondered if they have an acceptable amount of work to present, and stressed about the potential repercussions of the work not being acceptable.”

“You need to tell me more what you want. You can’t just get me to do a bunch of work and then judge it and see if it’s good.”

Challenges

- Uncertainty as to what is required
- Feeling unheard and unappreciated

Benefits

- A course that brings together multiple fields of knowledge
- Tailoring learning around specific interests
- Freedom and autonomy
- Multiple ways of doing things

Tensions

Participants noted that course expectations could be ambiguous, and marking could be subjective. Open-ended tasks impacted participants in different ways. For some, they could be a source of frustration and uncertainty, whilst others felt they could have a liberating effect.

Some participants were frustrated by tasks with more vague instructions and less defined parameters. One participant felt that expecting students to produce work without being given a definitive metric of a ‘good’ outcome was taking advantage of them.

Another participant in the discussion had the opposite experience and reflected on being excited by opportunities to create something without a firm expectation of what might work and what might not. This participant highlighted enjoying a process whereby critique sessions could help individuals understand and work towards an outcome and the means to judge its success simultaneously.

Within that discussion, participants connected their studies to practice and elaborated on how they felt that requirements, or lack thereof, reflected conditions in the real world.

"I like the sandbox mode nature of architecture. I think it's an opportunity to just throw something on the wall and then hear what they like. I think that the best relationship I've had with a tutor is one where I feel comfortable coming to class and saying, "look I've got this, I have no idea" and they give me feedback on what they think is working and what's not. And then every week you throw some more ideas on the wall, and more ideas stick until you can see your project coming to life"

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Encouraging transparency regarding the processes that staff use when marking
- Having a process in place for students to access if they want to contest their mark

Teaching staff

- Understanding that students learn in different ways
- Explaining to students the logic behind assessment

Individuals

- Developing an understanding of individual learning styles
- Acknowledging that people learn differently and there are many different acceptable ways to tackle architectural studies and practice

Achievement: Progress & Growth

“Looking at everyone else’s work I find not just inspiration, but a sense of pride and amazement at what everyone has managed to come up with”

“You’re just constantly asking ‘are you doing enough, this is architecture’. You can’t be going to bed at 11 or 12. Good on you, for living this healthy life and having a better balance, but also shame on you, because, you’re not really putting in what every other architecture student is... I’m fighting a battle in my head to work out whether what I’m doing is right every day.”

“It’s like you have to teach yourself a whole new language just to get through the course”

“I really enjoy when you get to the end of semester and can look back on the work that you’ve done while you’ve been really immersed. There’s been times when I’ve been stressed and upset, but then, later, when I look back at the projects that I’ve made, I feel really proud.”

“I find it difficult to remove the impact of somebody else’s negative opinion of my work”

Challenges

- Feeling stuck
- Feeling slow
- Feeling not good enough

Benefits

- Reflecting on growth
- Being inspired by peers
- Learning better ways of working

Tensions

Participants noted that immersion in studio culture could sometimes obstruct their ability to reflect on their progress. As participants reflected on their experiences, a conflict emerged between their commitment to producing work they were proud of and meeting physiological needs for sleep and adequate nutrition. Some participants felt that worrying about whether they were achieving their desired standard impaired their progress.

Participants in later stages of their education noted that as they had advanced through their degrees, they had developed new ways to measure their progress and growth in ways that reduced their stress. Masters students noted a difference in the need to prove themselves during their Bachelor’s degree and expressed relief in focusing more on the work and less on expectations.

Improving Wellbeing

Teaching staff

- Help students to recognise that progress is a continuous process

Individuals

- Find opportunities to pursue progress and growth without getting stuck anticipating achievement

Actualisation: Meaning & Fulfilment

“Realizing the opportunities and potential social impact that can be made through producing good architecture was an inspiring moment”

“For me, courses and studios that showed the different options related to working in the field of architecture were really positive experiences and influences. It was really eye-opening in learning how many options there were to explore different viable architectural futures”

“Sometimes I’m just like ‘wow, that’s really amazing’, just being able to see the different ways that students have interpreted a task.”

Challenges

- Neglecting other areas of life
- Taking criticism to heart
- Feeling pressure to be ‘all in’
- Concern for future working culture and job security

Benefits

- Architecture as social good
- Recognising that architecture can be practice in many different ways
- Conquering challenges
- Reflecting on growth
- Pursuing curiosity

Tensions

Whilst there was an underlying consensus with the focus group participants that architectural degrees were often difficult and pushed individuals beyond their comfort zone, participants expressed a sense of gratitude and gratification in being able to conquer challenges. Participants identified the end of the Semester as a time to reflect on their achievements with a sense of collective achievement and pride. Marking the end of the Semester with a celebration was often seen as a highlight in which the community could come together and celebrate shared achievement.

Participants associated the end of the semester with the ability to regain a sense of perspective and understand how much work they could complete. Some participants noted that they were often surprised by their capabilities. Participants expressed relief at being released from the pressure to continue producing work. They highlighted the contrast between this period of reflection with more challenging times in which they were too busy and stressed to think beyond trying to keep up with their ongoing tasks.

When given a chance to step back and reflect on busier times, some participants questioned whether the effort was worth it and felt the need to reappraise whether they had the drive to continue their studies.

“It can be like a big blow when you’ve put your heart and soul into something and a tutor or someone is really harsh - that’s when I find for me that really affects my wellbeing, it’s difficult to not let it affect you.”

“Architecture definitely just started to kind of overtake my mind as the most important thing to the point where I wasn’t sleeping I was stressed as hell, and yeah it just got really overwhelming.”

“Every assignment that we do in our architectural studies has an element of bringing together multiple fields of knowledge”

Participants highlighted specific facets of their architectural education that contributed to meaning and fulfilment beyond satisfying challenging requirements.

Participants noted the love of learning as a deeply satisfying part of their studies. Participants appreciated how their studies encapsulated many different disciplines, processes and modes of practice. Participants noted that their studies encapsulated a variety and diversity of content.

Exposure to ways in which architecture could be a tool to facilitate real-world benefit and social good was a key source of positive motivation. Students felt that exposure to diverse practitioners was a source of empowerment and growth and helped identify opportunities for where they might fit within the architecture community.

Improving Wellbeing

Institutions

- Encourage diversity in teaching staff and course offerings
- Support links with practice
- Recognise the benefit of novel ways of teaching

Teaching staff

- Help students understand that there are many different ways in which architecture can be practiced
- Encourage students to reflect on their own strengths and interests and pursue them

Individuals

- Explore opportunities to further identify and pursue areas of interest

Appendix

Ethics

This project received ethics clearance from Monash University.

Harm minimisation

In order to minimise any exposure to harm or discomfort through the focus groups, a series of guidelines were established and shared with the participants to promote a safe and meaningful discussion. It was established that:

- The focus groups were a safe space to discuss and listen without judgement.
- Participants could say as little or as much as they felt comfortable saying.
- Participants could discuss matters that came up within the focus group discussion, but should refrain from noting any personal names or identifiers outside the focus group discussion.
- Everyone would have time and space to speak.
- If students needed a break, they could request a time out at any time to speak to a convenor individually.

After sharing these guidelines, participants were also invited to suggest any additional rules for the discussion. At the beginning of each focus group, all participants were made aware of support services (university counselling services, GPs, Lifeline, Beyond Blue and Mental Health Australia) should they need them. They were also reminded that their participation was completely voluntary, and that they could choose to leave at any time or take other actions (such as turning off their camera/microphone) in order to feel comfortable and safe.

Focus Groups were conducted via teleconference (Zoom), with 3 - 8 participants, and in most cases, two facilitators per group. Focus groups were 90 minutes in duration, followed by a separate debriefing meeting between facilitators (a maximum of 30 minutes). Video, audio, and automated transcripts were recorded for each session with written consent of all participants.

For each session, two facilitators were available so that students could request a 'break out' space with a facilitator if required. Participants were also given the contact details of facilitators and encouraged to reach out for a follow-up discussion if required.

