



Discussion document: proposed changes to the VUW Minimum Resources Agreement

Introduction

The Minimum Resources Agreement (MRA) is an agreement between the PGSA and the University on which resources should be made available to PhD and Masters research students (referred to throughout this document as “thesis students”). It was originally created in 1997, and has been renegotiated four times since then, with each agreement covering approximately 4-5 years.

The most recent version of the MRA was agreed as an eighteen-month interim agreement, pending further discussion around flexible work spaces (see below). It is therefore now time to negotiate a new MRA, which will be in place from 2020 onwards.

The current document outlines the approach the PGSA executive would like to take in renegotiating the MRA. The main aim of this document is to make it possible for PGSA members to give their feedback on what the executive is proposing.

In summary, the PGSA executive would like feedback on the following:

- Are the proposed changes reasonable, and likely to improve circumstances for thesis students?
- Are there any additional changes to the MRA that should be proposed (within the constraints outlined below)?
- Are there any further issues that should be raised during discussions with the University?

Current Situation

The current MRA, which was agreed to by the PGSA and University in December 2017, was signed on an interim basis to allow the range of options regarding student facilities to be investigated (clause 2D of the agreement). The primary matter of contention at that time was the move towards constructing more “open plan” office spaces, and the possibility that thesis students would not be allocated dedicated desk spaces and other resources as a result. The PGSA argued for maintaining the resources outlined in clause 2D at that time.

The PGSA executive recognises that open plan spaces are unavoidable in many newer buildings, such as Te Toki a Rata, Rutherford House and Maru. At the MRA discussions in 2017 it was apparent that lobbying against open plan spaces for thesis students in all circumstances is not likely to be a successful negotiating approach, given the building work that has already taken place and the long-term office space strategy of the University. We therefore intend to focus on ensuring that open plan spaces for postgraduate use are designed in a way that works as well as possible for thesis

students. These should be “flexible learning spaces”, which avoid or minimise the main problems that open plan spaces can create, such as noise, lack of security and a poor working environment.

It is important to note that the move to flexible learning spaces will happen over time. Existing offices generally will not be converted to open plan (and in some cases, it would be impossible to do so anyway). It is therefore essential that the wording of the MRA is such that its provisions can apply to thesis students in either open plan or closed office spaces.

The University is not currently suggesting that postgraduate thesis students will have to ‘hot desk’. The PGSA executive is against the practice of hot desking for thesis students, unless the student indicates they do not require a permanent desk.

Other major issues

The MRA does not currently cover Honours students or taught Masters students who are not doing a thesis, or doing a 30 or 60 point thesis. The PGSA executive is aware that these students do not currently have sufficient support from the University (in particular, they have nowhere at the University to do work, except the library).

While these issues are technically out of the scope of the MRA, the PGSA executive plans to raise them as part of the negotiating process. See section on “Discussion Points” below for more.

Negotiating Process

The agreement must be negotiated with the University, and we therefore can only propose changes to the MRA; our proposed changes might not be accepted by the University.

The process of negotiating the MRA changes will proceed as follows:

1. This document will be circulated to PGSA members at the Annual General Meeting (AGM) on October 7th, 2019.
2. Members will have the opportunity to give feedback on the document, both at the AGM and afterwards via the PGSA website.
3. The PGSA executive will enter into negotiations with the University. The PGSA will propose the changes outlined below, incorporating any revisions following consultation.
4. After agreement is reached between the PGSA and the University, the updated document will be circulated to the PGSA membership. PGSA membership will then vote to support or oppose the updated MRA.
5. If the PGSA membership votes to support the new agreement, the PGSA and the University will sign the document and the provisions will come into effect for all thesis students. If the membership does not support the agreement, a new consultation period will be undertaken to determine why the PGSA membership did not support it.

Proposed Changes

Below, we outline the changes to the MRA we plan to propose to the University. In addition to the changes relating to flexible learning spaces, there will also be some smaller changes which are also described below.

Flexible learning spaces

This relates to section 2 of the current MRA. Note that currently this section of the MRA does not specify if the space allocated to students will be an office or an open plan area. Our proposal for this section is therefore to detail explicitly the main types of spaces students will be allocated and how those spaces should be configured to maximise students’ ability to work.

To that end, we propose the following changes:

- Explicitly state that students may be assigned a desk in either an office or an open plan space
- That the university should strive to create “flexible learning spaces” for thesis students, particularly for open plan spaces. Specifically, thesis students need areas that support all of the following:
 - Quiet study or work at a desk (with computer)
 - Quiet study or reading in a comfortable environment (such as on a couch in a reading room)
 - Having work-related conversations with colleagues or other people (such as in a bookable meeting room)
 - Having social conversations with colleagues (such as in a kitchen or common area)
- In general, an office shared between two or three people is sufficient for quiet study, and sometimes for reading. The University should ensure students with desks in open plan spaces are also able to study and read in an appropriate environment. In addition, the University should ensure students have access to areas where work and social discussion can take place.
- Some specific problems that need to be considered, particularly in regard to open plan spaces:
 - Noise – effort is required to control noise as much as possible. Specifically, there should be sufficient sound barriers between quiet areas and noisier areas (e.g. between work areas and meeting rooms or kitchens). Within open plan areas, barriers (such as partitions) should be placed to minimise the spread of noise. Ideally, consideration should also be given to the building materials used in these areas, as some materials are much better at reducing reverberation of noise than others.
 - Security – work spaces should only be accessible to those who are allocated a desk there. In practice, this means the area should be enclosed, and have lockable door(s) (although students may choose to keep these doors open during working hours)
 - Facilities – including toilets, kitchens and common areas need to be appropriate and sufficient for the number of people assigned to an area. They should also be accessible and within easy reach of students’ desks
 - Lighting – should follow appropriate standards
 - Heating – If office spaces are not automatically temperature controlled to approximately 21°C there should be heating/cooling provided which can bring the room to that temperature in an hour, at most.
 - Energy efficiency– efforts should be made to ensure heating and other energy usage is as efficient as possible within work spaces

The above information would supersede the discussion of “bookable spaces” currently in clause 2D.

The current work space minimum resources in section 2D (such as desk, ergonomic chair, lockable storage unit, common rooms etc.) will remain largely unchanged, and will continue to apply to offices and open plan areas.

During discussions with the University, we will try to make clear our position that regardless of whether they are in an office or open plan area, students should have access to both quiet study areas and common areas where conversation is allowed. Access to such areas supports student

wellbeing by providing appropriate working environments and helping to prevent thesis students becoming isolated.

Dedicated desks

The current MRA does not explicitly guarantee students a dedicated desk, but clause 2E states “Those students enrolled part-time or choosing to predominantly work elsewhere will not be able to command a dedicated space.”

We will propose amending clause 2E to make it clear that thesis students will be assigned a dedicated desk, unless they indicate that they do not want or need one.

Other issues

We are also proposing the following changes:

- Section 1, clause C: we will suggest that, as part of the FGR induction, thesis students are provided with written information, including the services that are available to postgraduate students, key contacts and a copy of the MRA
- Section 3, clause B, point b: we will suggest that, if students are required by a school to use an email address other than their vuw.ac.nz email address, that the University will ensure student profiles are updated accordingly, and any emails directed to their vuw.ac.nz accounts are forwarded to the alternate email address.
- Section 5: we will propose a clarification to the process for addressing concerns. The MRA should stipulate that students should contact the School’s Postgraduate Coordinator or Head of School in the first instance, and then contact the PGSA if a problem is not addressed acceptably.

Discussion Points

In addition to the changes to the existing MRA outlined above, we will also raise some additional issues with the University. While these are not, strictly speaking, in the scope of the MRA, they are related. We hope that raising these discussion points will allow us to get a better understanding of the position of the University, and to find ways to address the problems if possible.

The PGSA executive would also like suggestions from the PGSA membership on other discussion points to raise during negotiations.

Honours and Masters students

As mentioned above, honours and taught masters students who are doing 30 or 60 points theses do not have the sufficient resources to be able to do work on campus. Although the MRA does not cover these students, we would like to raise the issue with the University and get an idea of how we can better support these students.

Supervision time

We would like more information on the amount of time supervisors are supposed to be available to their students. If this information is available elsewhere, we would like a reference added to the MRA so that students are aware of these requirements.