

MDHS Student Forum 2026

Report 2: Forum Discussion Outcomes Report



Executive Summary

The inaugural MDHS Student Forum was held on Tuesday 4 August 2026, bringing together students from across the Faculty of Medicine, Dentistry and Health Sciences for structured small-group deliberations on three priority themes: feedback mechanisms, career readiness, and student wellbeing. The forum was organised by the MDHS Student Advisory Council (SAC) and designed to generate actionable student input for faculty leadership and working groups.

Across all three sessions, students articulated clear, consistent themes. On feedback, the dominant concern was a broken feedback loop: students do not see their input actioned, and this drives disengagement. On career readiness, students identified a gap between the knowledge their degrees provide and the practical experience, networks, and guidance they need to navigate career decisions confidently. On wellbeing, students named financial stress, inaccessible mental health services, and the absence of embedded community as their most significant unmet needs, with academic course design identified as a direct driver of wellbeing, not a separate issue.

This report presents the key themes, student feedback, and recommendations from each session, structured for use by faculty leaders and working groups.

3	8	50	15
Discussion themes	Tables / groups	Students	Senior staff

Session 1: Feedback Mechanisms

Problem statement

Students across MDHS have access to multiple formal feedback channels, end-of-subject surveys (ESS), subject coordinators, student representatives, and LMS forms, but engagement is low and students broadly report that their input does not lead to visible change. The question for this session was: how do we remove barriers and improve access for students to provide feedback, and how do we ensure that feedback is genuinely received and acted on?

Key themes

1. The feedback loop is broken

The most consistent theme across all tables was that students do not see their feedback actioned. This is the primary driver of disengagement: students stop providing feedback not because the channels are hard to access, but because there is no visible consequence to doing so.

- | *"Constantly being asked for feedback with no closing of the loop."*
- | *"Every year the same issues, but they haven't been heard. Don't see what is happening."*

2. Timing of surveys is poorly designed

The ESS is widely perceived as being released at the worst possible time, coinciding with assessments and end-of-semester pressure. Students noted that surveys released during Week 12 are completed under stress, produce lower quality responses, and feel like an afterthought.

- Mid-semester feedback was consistently raised as a preferred alternative, being earlier, more actionable, and less stressful.
- Protected time within lectures or tutorials to complete surveys was proposed across multiple tables.

3. Current channels feel impersonal and unaccountable

Email surveys and online forms feel disconnected from any real decision-making process. Students do not know where their feedback goes, who reads it, or whether anyone is accountable for acting on it. Subject representatives are seen as tokenistic, present but without real influence.

- | *"Subject reps feel tokenistic. They feel bad providing feedback to passionate staff."*
- | *"Feedback through emails and surveys feels impersonal, students are unsure of action intent or action taken."*

4. PhD and postgraduate students face distinct challenges

Postgraduate and PhD students noted that feedback mechanisms available at undergraduate level largely disappear at higher degree level. The supervisor relationship creates additional complexity: providing feedback about a supervisor carries real professional risk, and there is no safe or anonymous channel to do so.

Student feedback supporting the problem statement

What gets in the way of giving feedback?	What would make feedback feel worthwhile?
• Surveys coincide with exam and assessment periods • No sense that feedback is read or acted on • Student representatives feel tokenistic • Staff can be defensive when feedback is given in person • PhD students fear damaging supervisor relationships • Cultural differences affect comfort with giving honest feedback • Feedback not reaching the people who have power to change things	• A centralised feedback portal (like an IT ticket system) with a visible status • Automated acknowledgement when feedback is submitted • Published action plans showing what was changed as a result of feedback • Mid-semester surveys with genuine follow-up before the subject ends • Protected class time to complete surveys • Anonymous channels for all levels including PhD • Students involved in co-designing action plans with staff and alumni

Student quotes

- | *"Having a [feedback] platform / portal would be great, AI can filter comments."*

- | *"Knowing it's been actioned, contextualising changes and knowing what's been changed based on feedback."*
- | *"I find it hard to structure dedicated time to complete the EOS form when it's released during assignment and exam period. But I still somehow find time to participate in club activities. The draw comes from being able to do those activities with a cohort, and having the time and space pre-structured."*

Recommendations

Short-term recommendations	Longer-term recommendations
• Introduce mid-semester feedback points across all subjects, separate from the ESS • Require all subject coordinators to publish a brief written response to feedback at the start of the following semester (what was raised, what will change, what cannot change and why) • Pilot protected in-class time for survey completion (first 10 minutes of a lecture) • Introduce automated acknowledgement when ESS or feedback portal submissions are received • Develop a clear, publicised pathway for PhD students to provide feedback on supervision without professional risk	• Develop a centralised MDHS feedback portal with ticket-style tracking and visible status updates • Establish a student co-design process for feedback action plans, involving current students and alumni • Review and strengthen the student representative role so representatives have genuine influence and visibility • Consolidate feedback channels across UMSU, GSA, and subject level to reduce redundancy and confusion • Investigate cultural and linguistic accessibility of current feedback mechanisms for international students

Session 2: Career Readiness

Problem statement

Many MDHS students arrive with broad career aspirations but report uncertainty about their direction and limited visibility of pathways available to them. Both curriculum and extracurricular supports exist, but students consistently indicate these are not meeting them where they are. The question for this session: what would give students more clarity on what they want to do career-wise, and what barriers or opportunities exist in this space?

Key themes

1. The gap is experience and networks, not just information

Students do not primarily need more career information; they need authentic experiences that allow them to test career ideas in low-risk settings. Internships, shadowing, placements, and lab experiences were consistently cited as the most useful things students had encountered, and the most wanted by those who lacked them.

- | *"Job and work is the best training. More authentic experiences help with career readiness."*

| *"More work experience rather than just hearing from experts, need a taste of the job."*

2. Career readiness is not embedded in the curriculum

Students across degree types felt that career preparation was an extracurricular add-on rather than a core part of their education. This creates inequity: students with more time, resources, or social capital can access career development opportunities; others cannot. Students called explicitly for career readiness to be integrated into subjects, not as an additional burden, but as a shift in how existing curriculum is framed.

- Career skills should be baseline, not extra requirements.
- Subjects should communicate how their content maps onto career pathways, students want to understand relevance.
- The Melbourne Model was noted positively for providing time and breadth, but students felt the career dimension of that breadth was underdeveloped.

3. Mentoring and alumni networks are underutilised

Multiple tables identified mentoring, from peers, postgraduates, alumni, and industry professionals, as high-value and underdeveloped. The Ask Alumni program and peer mentor program were specifically named as underadvertised and underutilised. Students also noted that competitive dynamics within degrees actively discourage the peer knowledge-sharing that supports career navigation.

- | *"Peer mentor program is underutilised."*
- | *"Better use of alumni. More career panels, visiting professor series."*

4. International students face compounded barriers

International students reported not understanding Australian workplace culture, not knowing when or how to start looking for work, and not understanding how to network. These knowledge gaps require structured, culturally informed guidance.

5. Cost and time are real barriers to participation

Many career development opportunities, including expos, internships, volunteering and networking events, are unpaid and time-consuming. Students managing paid work alongside study, particularly those from financially stressed backgrounds, cannot access these opportunities on equal terms. Students called for paid internship options and for opportunities to be embedded in curriculum rather than requiring additional time commitment.

- | *"Key challenge: cost of living and time commitments to paid work, make opportunities paid."*

Student feedback supporting the problem statement

What shaped career clarity most?	What do students want more of?
• Placements and labs to offer direct experience in the field • Conversations with professionals and alumni • Student clubs and societies, peer networks and leadership experience	• Low-risk internships and job shadowing, ideally university-organised • Dedicated career pathways information, including what each major/subject opens and closes

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Guest lecturers who spoke to their own career path • Postgraduate connections (especially for undergrads) • Exposure to a range of career options, not just the most obvious pathway | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Industry nights and career talks (government, public service, research, clinical), at least 2 per semester • Alumni mentoring beyond the current offering, not just medicine/clinical • Better integration of career readiness into subject design • Open-day style booths during semester (not just at orientation) • Career counselling that is actually accessible |
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Student quotes

- | *"I just want there to be more breadth subjects and opportunities."*
- | *"There is a difference between employment and career. I feel like it takes a lot longer to find and establish a career. But it's also what is in a course that I think is part of the problem."*
- | *"I still don't know what I want to do when I grow up!"*

Recommendations

Short-term recommendations

- Audit and significantly improve promotion of existing career resources (Ask Alumni, peer mentor program, career counselling), as most students are unaware they exist
- Introduce a minimum of 2 faculty-led career talks per semester across degree programs, covering diverse pathways including government, research, and non-clinical roles
- Pilot a structured job shadowing program, university-organised and relationship-managed, starting with lab and clinical environments
- Establish a dedicated career pathways page showing what each major and subject sequence opens in terms of career options
- Connect undergraduates with postgraduate and PhD students through a structured mentoring program

Longer-term recommendations

- Embed career readiness as a curriculum design principle across MDHS degrees, not as a standalone subject
- Develop paid internship and work-integrated learning opportunities, with equitable access for students who cannot take unpaid roles
- Create structured career development support specifically designed for international students, addressing workplace culture, networking norms, and timing
- Establish a Visiting Professor or Industry Leader series at the faculty level, with regular seminar access for all students
- Partner with postgraduate programs to create clearer and more visible pathways from undergraduate to honours, masters, and PhD

Session 3: Student Wellbeing

Problem statement

Students across MDHS are navigating demanding academic programs alongside the pressures of everyday life, including housing, finances, social connection, and physical and mental health. The relationship between academic experience and wellbeing runs in both directions: unmet basic needs undermine learning, and poorly designed academic environments generate stress that erodes wellbeing. The question for this session: are students' basic needs being met, inside and outside the academic environment, and what could MDHS do differently to provide more holistic support?

Key themes

1. Course design is a wellbeing issue

The most emphatic theme across all tables was that student wellbeing cannot be meaningfully improved through support services alone if the academic environment is itself generating harm. Students called directly for wellbeing to be embedded into course design, through better assessment timing, reduced unnecessary load, and transparent subject design.

- | *"The best thing the uni could do to support students' wellbeing has nothing to do with support services. It would be designing the course and program so students could perform well in it."*
- | *"Tackling the core issue of academic stress, make academic wellbeing a core priority of course design."*

- Assessment timing is a primary stressor, exams and major assignments clustering at the same time across subjects was consistently named.
- Students avoid certain subjects because they 'destroy your WAM', perverse incentive structures are affecting course choices and learning breadth.

2. Mental health services are inaccessible in practice

While students are broadly aware that CAPS (Counselling and Psychological Services) exists, accessing it is described as extremely difficult. Appointments are unavailable when needed, no one knows when spots are released, sessions are shortened due to staff shortages, and the experience when students do get in can feel more administrative than therapeutic. The result is that students who take a positive step toward help are turned away, which worsens their sense of isolation.

- | *"CAPS is impossible to book in advance. Feels worse when trying to take a positive step but can't."*
- | *"Access issues to CAPS: how can you get an appointment when the process is so difficult, no one knows when spots are released and appointments are shortened due to staff shortage."*

- Students suggested that first-contact support should not require booking CAPS, instead peer mentors, trained volunteers, GPs, and advisors could serve as an accessible first point of contact.
- The 'Safer Community' program was mentioned positively by one table, but students at other tables had never heard of it as awareness is low.

3. Financial stress is the most significant unmet basic need

Financial stress was named at every table as a major driver of poor wellbeing and one that existing support services cannot address. Placement poverty (unpaid placements that prevent students from working), PhD stipends that do not reflect cost of living, and the absence of relevant government payments were specifically named.

- | *"Can have all the wellbeing services but financial stress has larger impacts and so these services can't address it."*
- | *"Placement poverty: the opportunity cost of working, doctorates don't qualify you for youth allowance, fair's fair."*
- PhD stipend named as inadequate (~\$16/hr effective rate cited).
- Students noted that exam periods create a double burden, time-poor and money-poor simultaneously, with reduced ability to eat well or access resources.

4. Community and belonging are underbuilt

Students consistently described a sense of social isolation, particularly students who arrive without established networks, including international students, and those in large cohorts where small-group contact with staff is limited. Existing programs that create community (Biomed Home Room, buddy programs, Scholar Connect) were praised, but coverage is patchy.

- | *"Biomed Home Room signposted as a very valuable experience for building friendships."*
- | *"Small group contexts: touch base, use names, get to know us."*
- Students asked for more non-alcoholic social events as an accessible option for social connection.
- Food access was raised as both a practical and community issue, shared eating spaces, microwaves, and access to affordable food were named specifically.
- | *"Bring back the microwaves to the Alan Gilbert Building."*

5. Placement wellbeing is a gap

Students on placements, particularly nursing, medicine, and allied health, face specific wellbeing challenges that are not well addressed by campus-based services. Clinical environments can be confronting, students feel isolated from their academic support networks, and the expectation of professional composure can make it harder to seek help.

- Students suggested a 'batphone' model: a 24/7 contact if feeling unsafe in a clinical space.
- Staff visiting placements and familiar faces in those environments would help students feel less isolated.
- Memoranda of understanding between supervisors and students around expectations were proposed to address subjectivity in placement assessment.

Student feedback supporting the problem statement

What is hardest to manage?	What would help most?
• Financial stress and placement poverty • Inaccessible mental health services (CAPS) • Assessment timing and clustering	• Course design that treats wellbeing as a design principle, not an afterthought • Expanded and genuinely accessible CAPS or alternative first-contact support

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| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Feeling isolated from peers and staff • Navigating placement demands without nearby support • International student experience, cultural isolation, financial barriers • Food access during exam periods | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial assistance, particularly for students on placement and PhD candidates • Peer mentoring programs with reach beyond first year and first semester • Regular small-group touchpoints with staff, use names, build relationships • Better advertising of existing resources at multiple points in the year, not just orientation • Non-alcoholic social events and accessible eating spaces |
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Student quotes

- | *"Wellbeing is having a sense of self outside of the competitive nature of the degrees."*
- | *"Students are mindful of impacting those around them, they don't feel they can show struggle."*
- | *"Reach out to students, make us feel seen."*

Recommendations

Short-term recommendations

- Adopt a faculty-wide policy against assessment clustering, coordinate assessment calendars across subjects within programs
- Expand CAPS capacity or introduce an accessible first-contact wellbeing support model (peer mentors, trained volunteers, embedded advisors)
- Significantly improve awareness of existing wellbeing resources at multiple touchpoints throughout the year, not only at orientation
- Mandate regular small-group student-staff touchpoints in all programs, particularly large cohort degrees
- Expand peer mentoring programs (e.g. Scholar Connect, buddy programs) to provide coverage across all year levels and programs
- Restore food access infrastructure (e.g. microwaves in Alan Gilbert Building) and

Longer-term recommendations

- Commission a review of how academic course design, assessment timing, subject load, WAM incentives, affects student wellbeing, and develop design principles for wellbeing-informed curriculum
- Develop a placement wellbeing model including 24/7 support contacts, staff visiting placements, and clear escalation pathways
- Investigate financial support mechanisms for students on unpaid placements and PhD candidates whose stipends do not reflect cost of living
- Develop culturally informed wellbeing support specifically for international students, including peer representative programs by country or cultural community

investigate affordable food options during exam periods

- Formalise supervisor-student expectation agreements for placement settings to reduce subjectivity and power imbalance