University Council: Students' Union Report: February 2026

Introduction

It is a requirement of the Education Act (1994) Part II, that the Governing Body of the University of Sheffield ensures Sheffield SU's compliance with certain conditions provided by The Act, including ensuring that the SU is operated in a fair and democratic manner and is accountable for its finances. The primary mechanism for this undertaking is the development and monitoring of a Code of Practice, which was reviewed as recently as Summer 2023 and is provided within the University Calendar.

In conversation with the University Secretary, we have agreed to provide a regular report to University Council to update on matters of compliance relative to the Code of Practice, as well as to give Council the opportunity to hear of our broader work, and indeed the wider student experience here at the University of Sheffield.

Students' Union Articles of Association Review

As previously reported to Council, the SU is working collaboratively with UoS Council to undertake the required 5 yearly review of our governing document. We have together established a working group as follows;

Role	Name	Notes
SU Chief Executive	Daryl Ormerod	Chair of Working Group
SU Officer Trustee	Sam Omondi	Provides Trustee and student input to ensure credibility and assurance. Acts as the ambassador/proposer for agreed proposals to the SU Trustee Board and SU Council.
SU Student Trustee	Louis Poyelle	Provides Trustee and student input to ensure credibility and assurance. Acts as the ambassador/proposer for agreed proposals to the SU Trustee Board and SU Council.
SU Director of People, Equity & Organisational Development	Beth Rodgers	Providing senior SU staff governance sponsorship and support.
SU Compliance Advisor	Kylie Cross	Providing compliance advice and secretarial support.
University Secretary	David Swinn	Providing University governance expertise and advice.
UoS Council	John Hogan	Former University Secretary/Registrar at

Member (External)		Newcastle University; Providing University input to promote credibility of process and assurance ahead of University Council approval of amends and demonstrating a close working partnership. Acts as the ambassador/proposer for agreed proposals to UoS Council.
UoS Council Member and Pro-Chancellor (External)	Claire Brownlie	Former Sheffield SU President and Chair of the previous University-led SU Articles review. UoS Pro-Chancellor and Chair of the UoS Council Equality Diversity and Inclusion Committee; Providing University input to promote credibility of process and assurance ahead of University Council approval of amends and demonstrating a close working partnership. Acts as the ambassador/proposer for agreed proposals to UoS Council.

The Group is working to the following timeline, which also provides a summary update of progress to date. We will be returning to UoS Council in due course to take feedback on our developing proposals, ahead of seeking final approval from all relevant authorities.

Stakeholder Group	Date	Purpose	Status	Notes
SU Trustee Board	02/10/2025	Approve AoA Review Project (jointly with UoS)	Completed	
UoS Council	06/10/2025	Approve AoA Review Project (jointly with SU)	Completed	
Working Group	13/11/2025	Briefing and scope. Confirm Corporate Structure. Begin discussions on options.	Completed	Discussions focus on SU Trustee Board
UoS Council	20/11/2025	Receive Update	Completed	
SU Trustee Board	11/12/2025	Receive Update	Completed	
Working Group	08/01/2026	Continue discussion on options	Completed	Discussion focus on Student Executive Committee
Legal advice on proposals	20/01/2026	Early advice on direction being established	Completed	Check "green" outstanding queries
SU Council	19/02/2026	Brief on project, progress and next steps	In progress	
Working Group	03/03/2026	Continue discussion on options	Not started	Discussion focus on student voice and policy-making
SU Trustee Board	19/03/2026	Consider and feedback on headline proposals, and to call Annual	Not started	

		Members' Meeting		
SU Council	19/03/2026	Consider and feedback on headline proposals	Not started	
UoS Council	30/04/2026	Consider and feedback on headline proposals	Not started	
Legal advice on proposals	01/05/2026	Advice on final proposals ahead of approvals being sought	Not started	
Working Group	13/05/2026	Finalise and confirm proposals	Not started	
SU Council (incorporating a Members' Meeting)	14/05/2026	Approve Proposals	Not started	
Working Group	01/06/2026	Consider SU Council decision and confirm next steps	Not started	
SU Trustee Board (incorporating a company law meeting)	11/06/2026	Approve Proposals	Not started	
UoS Council	16/07/2026	Approve Proposals	Not started	
Charity Commission	20/07/2026	Register Revised Articles with Charity Commission	Not started	Assumed approval as using template doc's (pending legal advice on changes)

The Big SU Survey 2025

The 2025 Big SU Survey (n=1,779, conducted November 2025) demonstrates that Sheffield Students' Union is widely trusted, highly visible, and central to the student experience. We are still in the process of analysing the data and this short report is intended to share early insights.

This report has a focus on cost of living and the way in which financial hardship colours the student experience. This cost of living data is taken from a variety of research (local and national) over the last few years.

Belonging at the University and in Sheffield

Students report an overall strong sense of belonging at the University of Sheffield. Most students say they have friends at university (94.3%), feel safe on campus (91.1%), and view the University as inclusive (88.9%). Measures linked to enjoyment and identity are slightly lower but still positive, including "having a good time" (82.3%) and feeling

Students who engage with the Students' Union consistently report **a better University experience** across every belonging measure.

that university is "for people like me" (79.0%).

Students who engage with the Students' Union consistently report better experiences across every belonging measure. Compared to non-engaged students, engaged students are far more likely to:

- have friends at university (95.0% vs 77.4%)
- feel safe on campus (92.1% vs 68.1%)
- feel the University is inclusive (89.8% vs 71.0%)
- feel part of their academic community (79.0% vs 69.6%)

This strongly suggests that SU engagement is a key contributor to whether students feel connected, supported, and able to enjoy university life.

Sense of belonging at the University of Sheffield by engagement
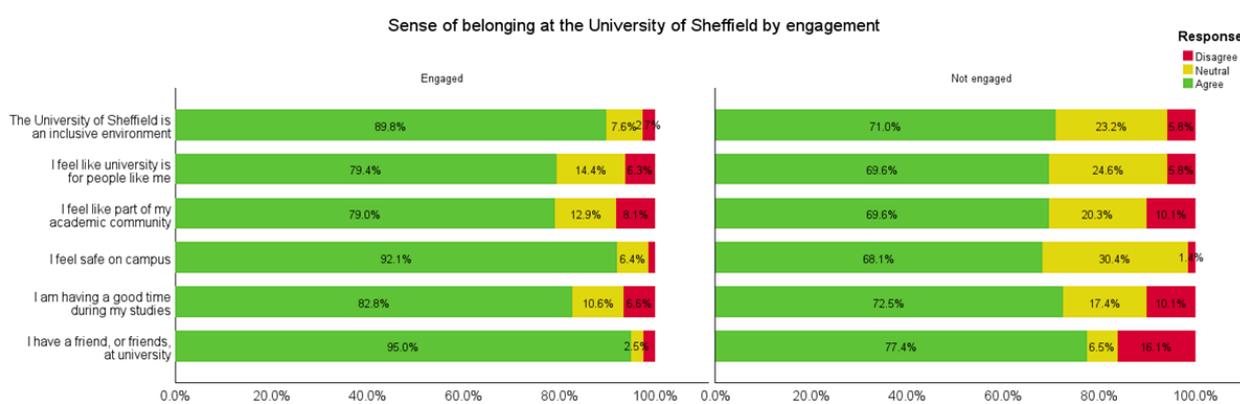
Student experience is positive, but uneven

Qualitative responses show that friendship-building and enjoyment are shaped heavily by course structure, mental health pressures, workload, commuting, and life circumstances. Students outside the traditional undergraduate experience (mature students, postgraduates, carers, international students, and disabled students) are more likely to report barriers to connection and belonging.

Belonging in Sheffield is also strong, and SU engagement helps

Students generally feel welcomed in Sheffield (91.5%) and safe in the city (83.3%), though fewer feel listened to (75.2%) or part of the wider community (72.5%). Again, students engaged with the SU report significantly stronger belonging across all measures, suggesting SU involvement supports not only university connection but also students' relationship with the city.

Belonging across the Students' Union, University, and City

Students report the strongest sense of belonging within the Students' Union, which is widely seen as welcoming, inclusive, and safe. However, meaningful connection is uneven and strongly linked to engagement: students involved in SU activities, particularly societies, are far more likely to feel part of a student community, while non-engaged students often experience the SU mainly as a functional space.

Impact of societies

Societies are a central part of the student experience, making a major contribution to belonging, wellbeing, and skills development. Students who participate report stronger social connections, improved wellbeing, greater confidence, and see societies as the main way to make friends and feel part of a wider community. Leadership and committee roles further support employability and transferable skills.

However, access is uneven. Time pressures, cost, distance learning, caring responsibilities, and undergraduate-focused provision limit participation for some groups, particularly postgraduate and mature students, meaning not all students benefit equally.

Stats at a Glance

Belonging in the Students' Union, University, and City

- 90.8% of students agree the Students' Union is welcoming and inclusive.
- 93.4% feel safe in the Students' Union.
- 72.2% feel a sense of belonging at the Students' Union overall.
- 94.3% of students say they have friends at the University of Sheffield.
- 91.1% feel safe on campus, and 88.9% perceive the University as inclusive.
- 91.5% of students feel welcome in the city of Sheffield.
- 72.5% feel part of the Sheffield community, indicating weaker belonging at city level than within the SU or University.

Impact of Societies

- 76.1% say participation in societies has improved their wellbeing.
- 76.3% report improved social and interpersonal skills through societies.
- 74.8% say societies helped them make new friends.
- 70.7% agree societies helped them develop skills and experiences for the future.

SU Engagement

Using quantitative data (registration numbers captured at 22 different interactions, transactions or touchpoints) we arrive at an engagement level of around 75%. We know that this will be an undercount as we do not capture registration numbers in every outlet or every transaction. Also, there are some students who will, for example, use the SU as study space or to meet their friends, for whom we have no system data. The real engagement level is likely, therefore, to be somewhat higher than 75%.

75%
of Students engaged with the SU in 2024/25

Whilst this is a remarkably high level of engagement we are interested to know more about the 'missing' 25%. We know that there are a group of these students that fall in the 'self-sufficient' category - they know about the SU, and what's available there but, for a variety of reasons they don't need it. This is something that, for example, some PG students often tell us (whilst other PGs see the SU as being too undergrad-centric).. But what about the rest? Fortunately, because we now know the registration number of the 75% of students that do engage we also know the identities of the 25% who don't. We are currently
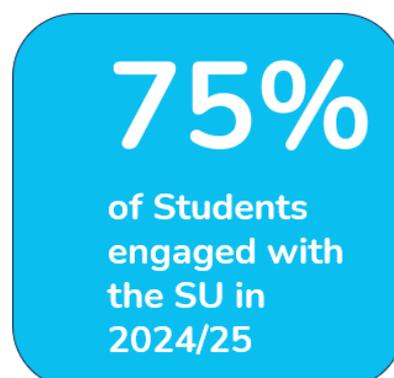
analysing that group of students to see if there are barriers to engagement as opposed to self-sufficiency.

2025 Belong and Influence: High Level Results

[The SU's strategy has two pillars: Belonging and Influence](). We believe that an excellent student experience is more likely to be achieved when students feel part of a community and that they have influence over their student lives. The results above demonstrate that students have a better universe experience, which supports our strategy.

We use a 'basket' of more than 20 measures to produce headline scores to indicate the extent to which students feel that they belong and have influence in three local settings. These questions were posed as a Likert scale (5 = strongly agree, 4 = agree, 3 = neutral and so on). We can see that the 2025/26 scores are broadly in line with 2024/25 levels.
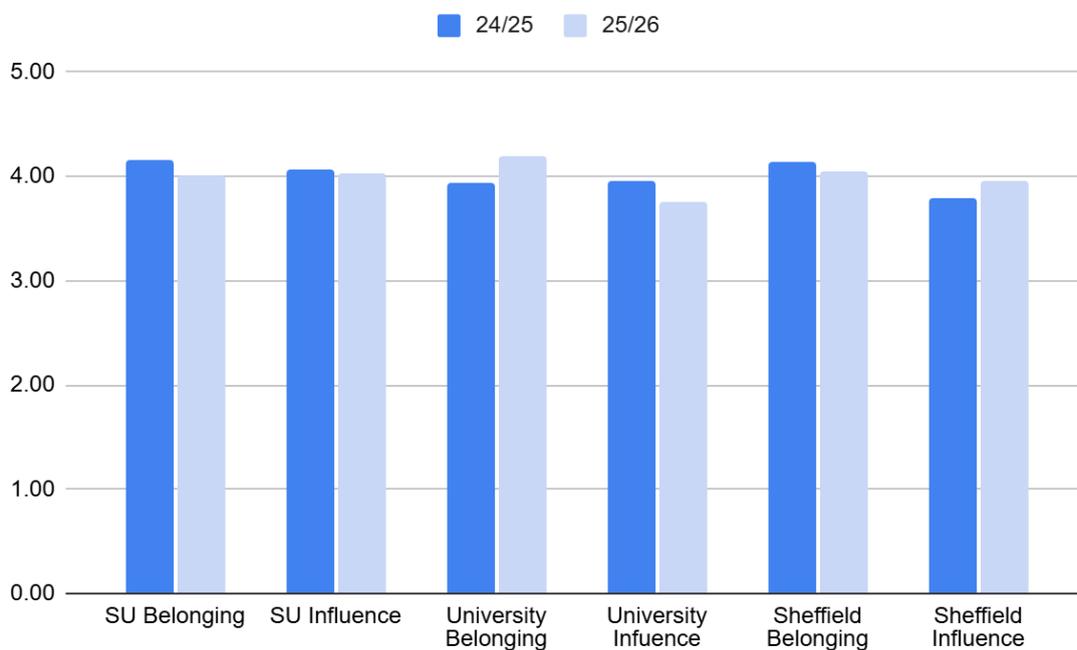
Some of these measures contribute to our strategic KPIs which tell us if the work we do is delivering the strategic impacts we wish to see. We are currently diving deeper into this data (both the 'priorities' and 'belong/influence' scores to inform our team plans for 2026/27.

A Bumper Start to 2025/26

We use engagement levels as one of the proxy measures of 'belonging'. Despite the shrinking student population, the first term of 2025/26 saw some of the highest SU engagement figures for years. We've had over 10,000 Give it a Go attendances - 1000 more than at the same point last year (using the end of Week 7 as the comparison point). 400 more unique attendees have been recorded which equates to around 18% of the student population having attended a Give it a Go event this year, versus 15% at the same point last year.

We have around 1200 more society memberships this year, and around 100 more unique memberships, likely in line with the increased number of high-tariff home undergraduates, and

trends we know with that cohort often joining multiple groups. A staggering 62% of the student population is now a member of at least one society, in comparison to 58% last year.
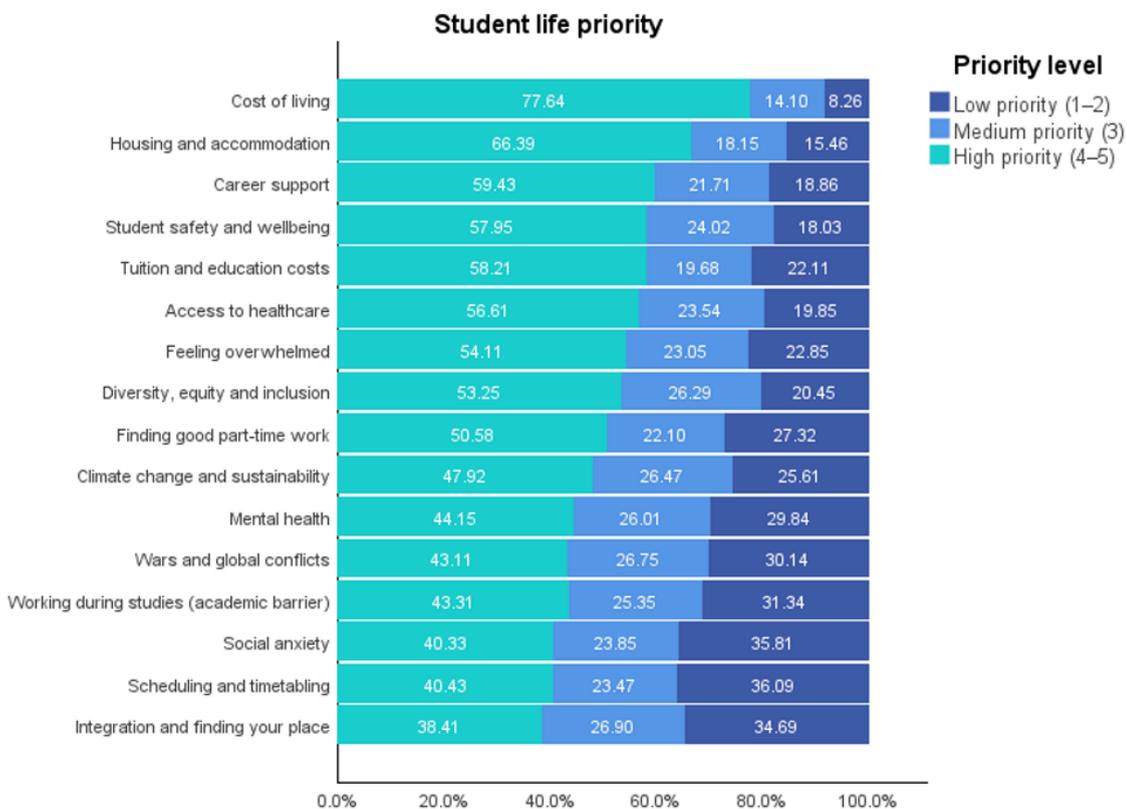
> A staggering **68%** of students are now a member of at least one society!

Student Priorities

We asked students to rank the importance of various concerns and challenges in their lives to give an indication of where student life priorities are in 2025/26. It's interesting to note that day-to-day life challenges such as finances, housing, careers and safety are more important to students than some of the large-scale 'wicked problems' such as climate change and wars. This is the continuation of a trend that we've noticed over the last few years. The data reveals that cost of living is an issue that disproportionately impacts PG and International students.

- Cost of living is the top priority, with over three-quarters of students rating it as a high priority.
- Housing and accommodation rank as the second most important issue.
- Career support is a top priority for a majority of students, reflecting concerns about employability after graduation.
- Tuition and education costs are a major concern shaping the student experience.
- Student safety and wellbeing complete the top five priorities.

Student life priority

Concern	High priority (4–5)	Medium priority (3)	Low priority (1–2)
Cost of living	77.64	14.10	8.26
Housing and accommodation	66.39	18.15	15.46
Career support	59.43	21.71	18.86
Student safety and wellbeing	57.95	24.02	18.03
Tuition and education costs	58.21	19.68	22.11
Access to healthcare	56.61	23.54	19.85
Feeling overwhelmed	54.11	23.05	22.85
Diversity, equity and inclusion	53.25	26.29	20.45
Finding good part-time work	50.58	22.10	27.32
Climate change and sustainability	47.92	26.47	25.61
Mental health	44.15	26.01	29.84
Wars and global conflicts	43.11	26.75	30.14
Working during studies (academic barrier)	43.31	25.35	31.34
Social anxiety	40.33	23.85	35.81
Scheduling and timetabling	40.43	23.47	36.09
Integration and finding your place	38.41	26.90	34.69

Priority level
- Low priority (1–2)
- Medium priority (3)
- High priority (4–5)

A Focus on Financial Hardship: Paywalled Access to Belonging and Participation?

Financial insecurity is the top priority for students, surpassing academic concerns and safety. The cost of living crisis is the dominant pressure on students, with 76% of Sheffield students reporting financial hardship. Nationally, financial anxiety has reached its highest level in six years, with 88% of students worried about money. This is no longer viewed as an episodic crisis but a "new normal" that acts as a structural feature of university life, shaping students' academic performance, health, and sense of belonging. In light of this we thought it useful to aggregate a variety of research on this topic (this is a mixture of local and national research).

Financial considerations extend to a students' choice of university and risk of withdrawal.

- **Strategic Enrollment:** 18% of first-year students chose their institution based on cheaper accommodation rather than academic prestige. 9% opted for local "post-92" institutions to facilitate commuting from home and save costs.
- **Withdrawal Risks:** One in five students has considered withdrawing or transferring due to financial strain.
- **Postgraduate Stress:** Master's students, ineligible for maintenance loans in England, report the highest stress levels; 27% have considered switching to part-time study to manage costs.

> 18% of first-year students **chose their institution based on cheaper accommodation** rather than academic prestige

The crisis is defined by a persistent gap between income and basic needs. Students report an average monthly income of £505, leaving a shortfall of £421 against the £919 they believe is needed to complete their studies with confidence.

- **Deprivation**: This deficit forces daily trade-offs between essentials. Nearly 50% of students report that hunger has affected their ability to study, and over 40% have been too cold to concentrate because they could not afford heating. 68% have noted steep price rises in food, leading to skipped meals or the purchase of low-nutrient options.
- **Maintenance Loans**: Support is increasingly decoupled from reality; for many, average rent consumes nearly 100% of a standard maintenance loan, leaving almost nothing for other living expenses.
- **Mental Health:** Financial pressure serves as a "multiplier of mental health risk," with 63% of students reporting that money worries negatively impact their mental health.
- **Psychological Toll**: Students describe a constant backdrop of stress, anxiety, and overwhelm. This chronic stress is linked to disrupted sleep (35%) and exhaustion, which erodes the cognitive capacity needed for learning.
- **Physical Decline**: Beyond hunger and cold, 33% of students report a decline in their physical health due to financial strain. In the most severe cases, financial stress is identified as a significant risk factor in student suicides.
- **Attendance and Focus:** 47% struggle to focus and study. Many are forced to skip lectures because they cannot afford the cost of travel to campus.

While the financial crisis is widespread, it is not evenly distributed

- **International Students**: Face high tuition fees and rapidly rising visa and Immigration Health Surcharge costs. They are also significantly more likely to feel lonely and report having no true friends.
- **Commuter Students**: Now representing 51% of the student body, nationally (71% of whom commute out of necessity), this group faces high fixed transport costs that directly limit their attendance and time for social integration.
- **Postgraduates**: Master's students report the highest cost-related stress because they do not receive maintenance loans in England; 27% have considered switching to part-time study just to spread out living costs.
- **Parents and Carers**: Students with childcare requirements spend an average of £1,225 extra per year, facing intense pressure to balance family responsibilities with the need for paid work.

Working Students

Around 40% of Sheffield students have some kind of employment in addition to their studies. The chart below (2024) shows that, nationally, where students are working, they are taking more hours than previously.
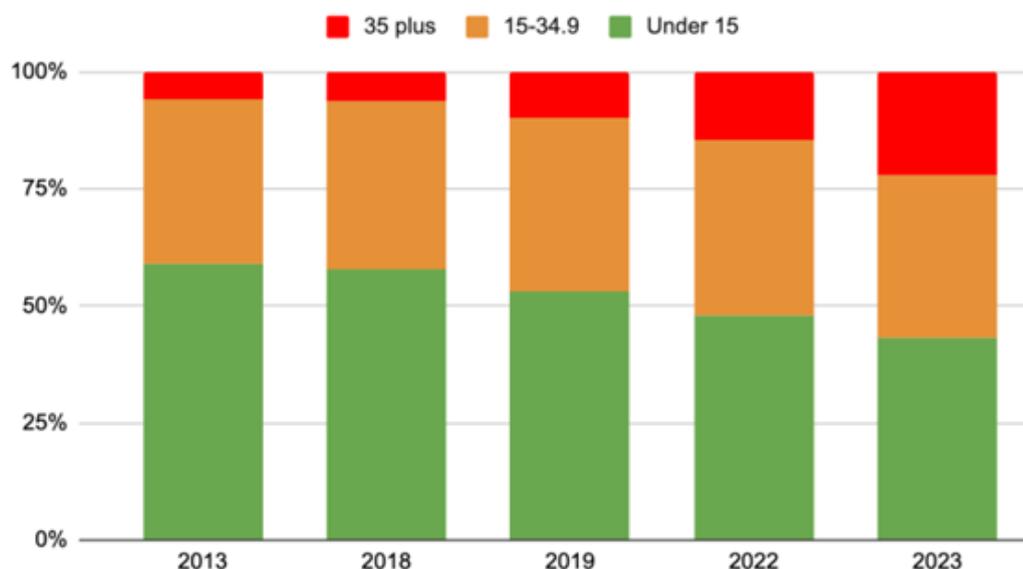
It is interesting to consider if the idea of a 'full time' degree applies in these cases. The crisis is fundamentally reshaping the "full-time" student identity as academic functioning becomes harder to sustain. Nationally, 42% of students

Hours worked if employed, Jan-Mar, FT UG FD

Legend: 35 plus | 15-34.9 | Under 15

report that employment taken to cover costs has harmed their academic performance through fatigue and reduced study time. Working students are 60% more likely to miss society events and extracurricular activities, restricting their peer support networks.

The most popular employment sectors for students in the UK are: Education (24%), Health and Social Care (19%), Hospitality (19%) and Retail (17%). WonkHE's research found that students who are working to support their studies would welcome the following:

- Timetable Flexibility and Structure: Requests for more consistent, condensed, or adjustable timetables to better accommodate part-time work, including earlier or remote classes and fewer mid-day gaps.

- Employment Support: A strong desire for more on-campus jobs, partnerships with local ethical employers, job fairs, career guidance, CV/interview help, and better advertising of job opportunities.
- Financial and Welfare Support: Appeals for bursaries, grants, food/travel vouchers, subsidised costs (e.g. accommodation, gym), and help managing living expenses, especially for those who must work alongside studies.
- Academic Flexibility and Mental Health: Calls for deadline leniency, hybrid learning options, academic extensions, better understanding from staff, and increased mental health and wellbeing support for working students.

What is to be done?

While the Students' Union (or the University) cannot solve macro-economic pressures such as inflation, maintenance loan policy or the cost of living crisis, understanding the scale and nature of student financial hardship is critical.

SImply being aware of the pressures is hugely helpful, and helps us empathise. In addition, through initiatives such as Money Week, the Community Hub, free breakfast provision, and proactive financial advice, we are helping students stretch limited budgets further. Our Advice Centre continues to put money back into students' pockets through benefits guidance, hardship support and renters' rights advice, while the SU's role as an employer provides accessible, flexible paid work opportunities. Within our remit we will continue to identify ways to reduce financial stress, increase stability, and ensure that students are better able to focus on their studies and enjoy their university experience despite wider economic pressures.

> The SU Advice Centre supported students to reclaim over **£542,224** in 24/25

> In 24/25 the SU paid student staff more than **£1.3m**

Self-Reporting of Characteristics

In the 2025 Big SU Survey we asked how students identify against certain characteristics. These are broken down in the tables below, if of interest to University colleagues.

Do you consider yourself to have a disability, impairment or long term condition?	%
No	64.90
Prefer not to say	6.58
Yes	28.52

This indicates a higher percentage of disabled students when compared to UoS reports - but it is possible that students may feel more comfortable in disclosing this information in a SU-owned

survey. Where students went on to share information about their disability there was an overwhelming predominance of mental health conditions.

Which of the following best describes your gender identity	%
Woman	59.87
Man	31.68
Prefer not to say	3.74
Non-binary	3.35
Prefer to self-describe	1.35

Those students who preferred to self-describe included categories such as genderqueer, gender androgynous, demi femme, furry, gender fluid, gender queer women, trans man, transgender, trans masc, trans guy. Students find the UoS practice of reporting gender as M/F/X as limiting and problematic.

Which of the following best describes your sexual orientation?	%
Heterosexual	60.65
Bisexual	18.45
Prefer not to say	10.13
Gay or Lesbian	6.65
Prefer to self-describe:	4.13

Those students who preferred to self-describe included categories such as asexual, biromantic, pansexual, fluid, not sure/questioning, pan/fin/gynosexual, panromantic.

Which of the following best describes your ethnic background?	%
Asian or Asian British	15.29
Black, Black British, Caribbean or African	2.00
Mixed or Multiple Ethnic Groups	5.55
Other ethnic group	2.45
Prefer not to say	3.74
White	70.97

We can see that white students are significantly overrepresented in our survey (71% of survey respondents vs 58% of the general population).

Sources Used

- The Big Survey Report 2024, Sheffield SU
- The Big Survey Report 2025, Sheffield SU
- Student Money & Wellbeing 2026 Report - Blackbullion
- Sheffield SU Cost of Living Report (March 2023)
- Mature Students Hub Focus Groups Evaluation Report (January 2026)
- Mature students and Chinese students Survey and Interview Report (October 2024)
- Welcome and Induction Student Survey 2024 Report
- Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic (BAME) Student Voice Survey Key Findings Report 2023/24
- A Focus on International Students (Synthesis of 2023/24 Research)
- Welcome Activity 2025: Directorate Evaluation Update
- Ten Things: Wonkhe SU Briefing (Nov/Dec 2025) 39
- Written Evidence Submission to APPG for Students: Commission on Students in HE
- Sheffield Student Union Financial Barriers to Engagement Consultancy Project