University Council:

SU Student Experience Report

Meeting Date :	26th February 2025
Agenda Item & Paper Title:	SU Student Experience Report
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Introduction to main points of the paper:	To provide University Council with insight into the Student Experience at Sheffield and latest updates from the SU.
Are the contents confidential:	No
Paper previously presented at:	N/A

1.0 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.

2.0 Strategic Staffing Review

The SU is undergoing a review of its staffing structure to ensure we are aligned with our new strategy and able to navigate financial challenges ahead. The case for change and proposed adjustments aim to realign our resources effectively while taking steps to minimise compulsory redundancies. In terms of the financial challenge the two most significant changes are the 10% (£400k) reduction in the size of the subvention grant and the additional £150k burden resulting in the imminent changes to employer's National

Insurance contributions. In addition we are budgeting for inflation in our pay and non-pay costs. In total, the SU needs to make savings of £700k by the start of the 25/26 academic year.

We have been able to identify £230k in savings from non-staff budgets. To address the remaining challenge the SU has developed a series of proposed changes, including a new staffing model designed to deliver on our strategic ambitions whilst also being financially sustainable. As we have taken a *strategy-led; finance-informed* approach to designing our staffing solutions, and considered where our strategic priorities require staffing resources to be prioritised, it is the case that there are varied changes between the Directorates. For example, there are significant expectations of our influence work written into our new strategy, so we have sought to invest staff resources in new and/or different roles within our Influence Directorate. This means we have had to find additional contributions from other parts of the organisation.

As these proposals are subject to consultation, we cannot confirm the total number of headcount reduction across the organisation currently, however we anticipate it to be in the region of 7 - 10 FTE. The proposals have been subject to a rigorous Equity Impact Assessment. To mitigate any negative impact, a comprehensive staff support and development package has been created.

We have advised colleagues in the University of the proposed changes, particularly where those changes are likely to impact SU teams that University colleagues work most closely with. We expect the strategic staffing review to be complete by the start of term 3.

3.0 Officer Role Review

The SU's Officer Role Review, which has been taking place across 2024, has culminated in the Board of Trustees being asked (by SU Council) to make a decision on changes to the Officer Roles. In summary there will be a reduction from 7 to 6 Full Time Officers and a move from elected Part Time Officers to appointed Liberation Facilitators.

The new Officers will be elected in the upcoming elections (results on March 21st). From June 2025 the Full Time Officers of the SU shall be:

- SU President (Democracy & Community)
- Education Officer
- Sustainability & Development Officer
- Liberation & Activities Officer
- Wellbeing & Sports Officer
- International & Welfare Officer

All of the Part Time Officer roles are to be removed with the exception of the Postgraduate Officers (x2).

The remaining elected Part Time Officers will be transformed into Liberation Facilitators to be recruited in September 2025. The Liberation Facilitator model is designed to empower and support students from marginalised or underrepresented groups by establishing dedicated advocacy roles within the Students' Union. Developed in response to student feedback, this model addresses the needs of liberation groups through focused representation and actionable outcomes.

The new model will feature appointed and employed roles (5-10 hours per week with built in flexibility). The appointments will happen annually via a formal process involving SU representatives. The focus area will be LGBTQ+, gender equality, disabled and neurodivergent, ethnic diversity, and class equity. Facilitators will work within their subgroup and the Liberation Forum to gather feedback and inform advocacy.

4.0 Freedom of Speech

The Government has shared further details of changes to the Higher Education (Freedom of Speech) legislation (an Act whose implementation was paused in summer 2024, shortly after the General Election). In its original form, students' unions were included in most of the Bill's provisions, including the statutory tort. This meant an SU could be sued if someone claimed the SU restricted or prevented lawful free speech on campus.

During the Bill's journey through Parliament (particularly in the House of Lords), there was significant pushback on including SUs in the statutory tort. Critics argued that creating legal risks on often small, charitable organizations would be too heavy-handed and stifle student-led events. The government has agreed to scale back or remove some of the provisions applying to SUs, especially around the direct right to sue.

SUs must still show they're respecting free speech, but the specific risk of being sued under the new law has been diluted or removed. We do, of course, still operate under general charity law and existing free speech rules. Individuals can still complain about an SU's free speech stance (via internal processes), but the direct legal route against SUs is much more limited than the Bill first proposed.

We expect that, even though SUs have been partly taken out of scope, they'll likely get more oversight from regulators than in the past. As always, we will need to be sure to keep good records and make sure events, speakers, and policies align with free speech obligations.

Sheffield SU welcomes the relaxation of burdens previously proposed for Students' Unions. We are working closely with the University on this issue and we are keen to ensure alignment with all partners as further details emerge.

5.0 Memorandum of Understanding (MoU)

The SU and University have drafted a new Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) between the two organisations. The MoU spells out how the University of Sheffield and the Students' Union will work together. It's based on shared values, trust, and respect. The MoU is reviewed by the Union/University Partnership Board before being recommended onwards for approval by the University Executive Board and the SU Trustee Board.

The MoU is guided by the Education Act (1994) as the main piece of legislation and is also informed by the Charities Act (2011) and the Companies Act (2006). The people overseeing this agreement are:

- The University Secretary (representing the University Council),
- The Union's Chief Executive (representing the Union's Trustee Board).

With day-to-day management of the MoU delegated to senior staff on both sides. There are many different agreements between the University and the Union and the detail of these is, necessarily, not covered by the MoU. Rather, the MoU is a 'framework' or list of agreements/reports setting out the ownership of each and the date at which they will next be reviewed. The full list of agreements/reports is as follows:

Reporting Framework:

- Students' Union Forecast & Budget
- SU Audited Financial Statements
- Students' Union Annual Report on Complaints & Discipline

Agreement Framework:

- Memorandum of Understanding
- Code of Practice Relating to the Students' Union
- SSU Articles of Association
- Relationship Agreement
- Use of Premises & Lease Agreement
- Financial Agreement
- Data Sharing & Security Agreement including IT & Digital Infrastructure
- Freedom of Speech

- Use of University name, brand and imagery
- Sport Partnership Agreement
- Complaints & Discipline Agreement

The MoU itself will be reviewed alongside the Union's constitution every five years, or earlier if something important changes. Minor updates, like job title changes, can be made at any point, with the agreement of the University Secretary.

The SU welcomes the introduction of the MoU and thanks UEB colleagues for their part in creating this important document.

6.0 Evidence for Change: The Big SU Survey (Wave 1)

The SU's longstanding practice has been to conduct a single annual survey of all students to gain insight on a range of topics relating to their experience of student life. We are changing our approach for 24/25 onwards and we intend to conduct two surveys and a number of focus groups. This will allow us to elicit insight data which has greater depth and is more timely.

In November 2024 we conducted our first survey of the year (The Big SU Survey Wave 1) and we are pleased to be able to share the initial findings with University Council.

- **Survey Purpose**: Gather insights on the student experience to inform evidence-based decision-making to support our new strategy and shape the SU's new strategic KPIs.
- **Method**: 38 questions (27 quantitative, 11 qualitative), including specific questions for disabled students.
- **Participation**: The survey received **2,234 responses.** 8% of the student population, capturing a broad range of views.
- **Representation:** The survey was broadly representative in terms of PGT, PGR, UGT and disabled students. International students were underrepresented. Female and white students were both overrepresented (note that the data below is not yet weighted to reflect different representation levels).

6.1 The Survey's Headlines

The survey sought to learn more about the extent to which students feel that they BELONG and have INFLUENCE over the SU, the University, the City of Sheffield and the UK's HE landscape. Thus far we have analysed the first results for 'belong' and 'influence' with regards to the SU and University, the rest will follow in the coming months.

In pursuing our mission, we will focus on **BELONGING** and **INFLUENCE**

6.2 Belonging and the SU

Students were positive about the SU's creation of a safe, inclusive, and welcoming environment (each scoring between 87%-91% agreement) . They praised the building's vibrant atmosphere and activities available. Feedback on our services, facilities, and activities was overwhelmingly positive from students. The SU's cafes, food offers, study space and zero-waste shop all received positive quotes, alongside opportunities such as Give it a Go, fairs and societies.

> *'Even when I am having a bad day, walking into the student's union, even if I am alone, makes me really feel like part of University. It never fails to boost my mood'*
>
> *'First time doing uni in the UK and honestly SU has been a big part of making me feel settled'*

76% of students said that during their time as a student they had participated through the Students' Union, as shown in the chart below. Students who said they had participated through the Students' Union reported positive outcomes from doing so. The highest positive outcomes were the development of personal / interpersonal skills, making new friends, and improved wellbeing (all 85%+).
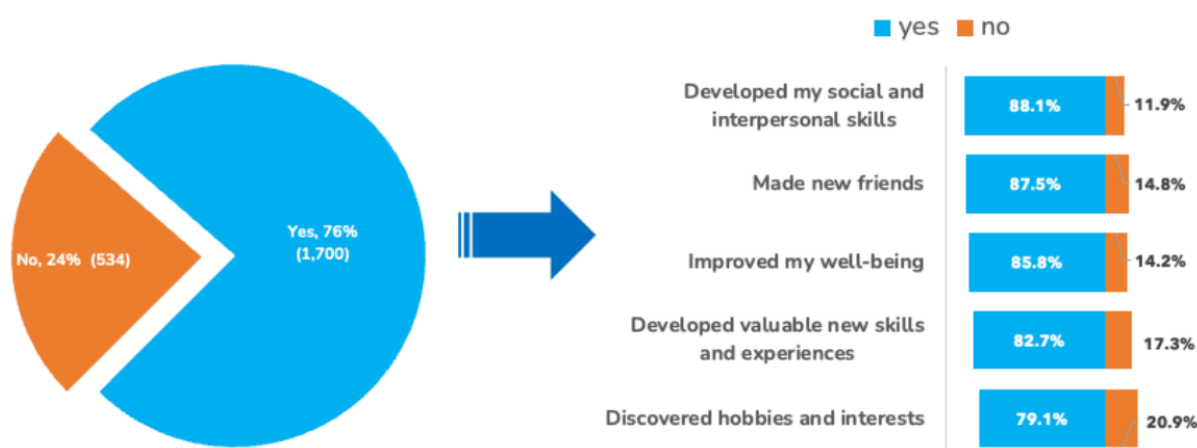
Question: have you participated through the students' union?

The majority of students also reported feeling belonging and connections to communities through their SU. Students praised the SU's diverse communities and their ability to create friendships and support networks. 72% agreed the SU helps them have fun, though 20% of students were neutral or disagreed (see below for more information). SU Belonging and connecting to communities also scored lower than the other SU focused statements (64-67%) and some students from specific groups commented that they felt excluded from or by the Students' Union for differing reasons (including postgraduates, commuters, Jewish students, armed forces members, and some from the LGBTQIA+ community). Other reasons for lacking engagement included a lack of awareness of activity, financial constraints, type and timing of events, and discontent with governance and policy decisions.
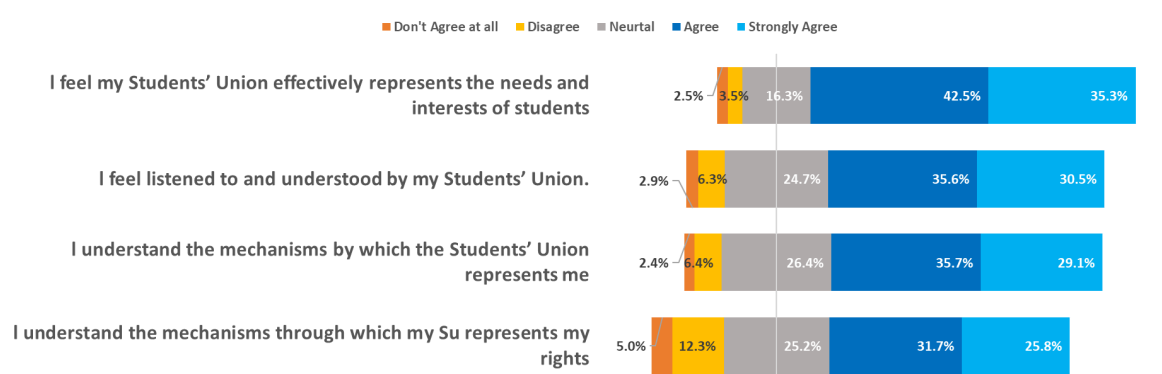
> **Students Said...**
>
> 'As someone who has just begun a postgraduate degree at Sheffield, I am really impressed by how good the union is here compared to my old university.'
>
> 'I love the Students' Union but places to buy food can be expensive, especially as it's for students.'
>
> 'Almost all events seem to focus around going out for drinks, so for those who don't enjoy that, there is not much opportunity.'

Although 87% of students agreed the SU building was easily accessible, we also received several comments from students about difficulties navigating around the building due to lack of signage and inaccessible routes.

6.3 Influence and the SU

Legend: Don't Agree at all · Disagree · Neutral · Agree · Strongly Agree

Statement	Don't Agree at all	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
I feel my Students' Union effectively represents the needs and interests of students	2.5%	3.5%	16.3%	42.5%	35.3%
I feel listened to and understood by my Students' Union.	2.9%	6.3%	24.7%	35.6%	30.5%
I understand the mechanisms by which the Students' Union represents me	2.4%	6.4%	26.4%	35.7%	29.1%
I understand the mechanisms through which my Su represents my rights	5.0%	12.3%	25.2%	31.7%	25.8%

The majority of students agree the SU is effective in its representation of students and are appreciative of its work in this area. There was less agreement when students were asked about their understanding of SU representation mechanisms, where 1 in 3 students disagreed or were neutral in their response. 1 in 3 students also disagreed or were neutral about the feeling listened to and understood by their SU.
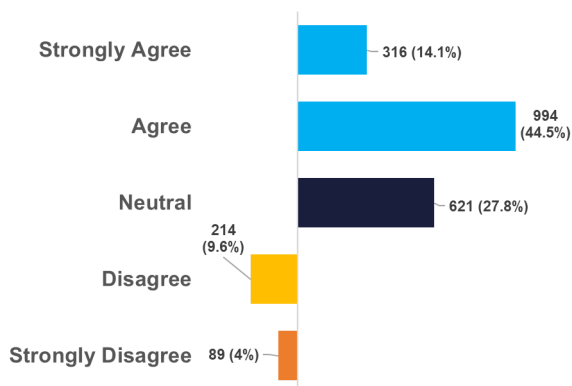
6.4 Belonging & Influence in the University

Do you feel connected to an academic community based on the course you are studying?

Response	Count (%)
Strongly Agree	316 (14.1%)
Agree	994 (44.5%)
Neutral	621 (27.8%)
Disagree	214 (9.6%)
Strongly Disagree	89 (4%)

Do you feel connected to an academic community based on the department or school of which you are a member?

Response	Count (%)
Strongly Agree	300 (13.4%)
Agree	977 (43.7%)
Neutral	624 (27.9%)
Disagree	255 (11.4%)
Strongly Disagree	78 (3.5%)
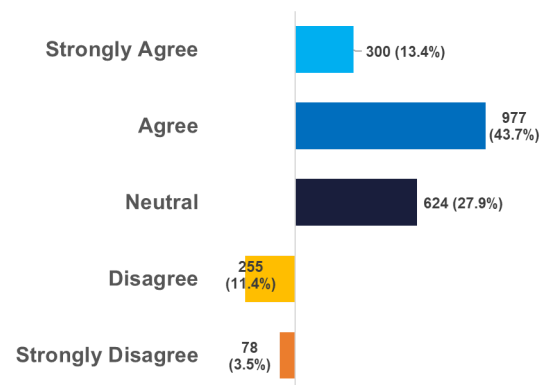
Only 59% and 57% of students agree they feel connected to their course or department / school academic community. There are a significant number of students that gave a neutral or negative response to this question. Just under half of students don't feel connected.

Statement	No	Yes
I have opportunities to participate in activities or events that strengthen my academic community	352 (15.8%)	1,882 (84.2%)
I am aware of the opportunity to engage in my academic learning community	415 (18.6%)	1,819 (81.4%)
I have access to resources that help me develop leadership skills within my academic community	474 (21.2%)	1,760 (78.8%)
I recognise and associate with my respective school or departmental symbols of community	522 (23.4%)	1,712 (76.6%)
I feel connected to my academic learning community	691 (30.9%)	1,543 (69.1%)
I feel I can own, lead, and develop my academic learning communities	874 (39.1%)	1,360 (60.9%)

The majority of students tell us they feel they have the opportunity to engage with, and recognise benefits of, being part of their academic communities. However, all statements had students who didn't agree with them ranging from 15-39%

In particular a significant proportion of students:
- don't feel connected to their academic learning community: 31%
- feel they can own, lead, and develop their academic communities: 39%

Students Said...

'I feel I am part of a learning, academic community which is something the History department try to focus on. I am on the School's Education Committee and the History Society committee so I feel well-connected.'

'I am a postgraduate student in medicine, and because the research groups are spread across the campus there is not much opportunity to meet and engage with other post-graduate groups.'

'I have struggled to make friends on my course so my friends are all from different courses. I think it would be nice for there to be better means to create meaningful relationships with people on your course which are organised by the department/uni.'

6.5 Who is not having fun?

The majority of students agreed that the SU helped them have fun, though over 20% of students were neutral or disagreed. Some cited barriers to involvement and inclusion, which will be addressed. We have also conducted additional analysis on this question to better understand those students reporting they aren't having fun at University.

BAME students (+8.4%), **disabled** students (+13.0%), **postgraduate research** students (+5.1%), **first-generation** university students (+7.8%), and **low-income** students (+6.3%) have a higher proportion of respondents selecting not having fun compared to their representation in the overall survey, suggesting they may face shared challenges. Students with long **commutes** (+8.0%) and those **staying with family** (+6.3%) also show a notable increase in reporting lower enjoyment at university.

Undergraduates (-13.4%), students living in university accommodation (-5.3%), and those not working while studying (-6.1%) have a lower proportion of respondents selecting "Not Having Fun," indicating they may experience fewer of these challenges.

Students reporting that they aren't having fun rate SU belonging and connection statements lower than average. 42% of these students also reported never participating in Students' Union activities, a participation rate significantly lower than the overall survey respondents (24% never participated).
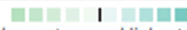
We will use this analysis along with further research and discussions with staff about how we can create interventions to improve results.

6.6 Macro Issues

In addition to our strategic impact data, we took the opportunity to ask students how they are feeling about ten 'macro issues' that exist in the world today.

Please rank the following issues in order of importance to you.

Item	Overall Rank	Rank Distribution	Score	No. of Rankings
Cost of Living	1		13,625	1,914
Mental Health	2		11,555	1,921
Housing and Accommodation	3		11,377	1,917
Tuition and Education Costs	4		11,152	1,915
Student Safety and Well-being	5		10,968	1,917
Job Opportunities and Career Support	6		10,233	1,915
Access to Healthcare	7		10,157	1,913
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion	8		9,675	1,918
Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability	9		9,151	1,917
Wars and Conflicts	10		7,488	1,913

Lowest Rank — Highest Rank

It is interesting to note that economic challenges or 'day to day life' dominates the concerns towards the top of the rankings, whereas the massive global issues rank lower. This is not to say that climate change (for example) is not an incredibly important issue for students, it seems to be more that it is jostling for attention amongst some other wicked problems in students' lives.

6.7 Finally: What 3 Words?

We asked students to tell us how they are feeling in 3 words. The approximate distribution of major themes are shown below (many responses include more than one theme, so percentages overlap):

- **Positive/Hopeful** ("happy," "excited," "hopeful") **~40%**
- **Tired/Fatigued** ("tired," "sleepy," "exhausted") **~30%**
- **Stressed/Overwhelmed/Anxious** ("stressed," "overwhelmed," "worried") **~25%**
- **Busy/Productive** ("busy," "productive," "active") **~15%**

- **Content/Relaxed** ("content," "calm," "chilled") **~10%**
- **Lonely/Isolated/Depressed ~10%**
- **Safe/Secure ~5–7%**

Minority or unique Responses:

- **References to financial struggles** ("broke," "hungry," "poor")
- **Expressions of anger or betrayal** ("angry," "disappointed," "frustrated")
- **Activist or outlier statements** ("End complicity now," "Fund committees more," "Sausage roll please")
- **Confusion and possible contradictory feelings** ("Safe but depressed," "Happy but lonely")

6.8 Conclusion: Building Confidence in Data Use & Embedding a 'Professional Curiosity' Culture

It is accepted that insights like those presented above can lead to "So what?" questions, and we acknowledge that there have been times when our ability to generate good data and insight has outstripped our ability to act upon those insights. The SU aims to foster a culture that understands the importance of data-driven insights. It is not enough to simply produce excellent data, analysis and insights - we must also, as an organisation, be eager to *consume* these insights and make changes accordingly. We are in the process of identifying a manager-level 'Data Champion' for each of our key services. This person will be expected to ask us to provide new insights in the interest of continual data-driven service improvement and will be expected to communicate insights to their teams.

In addition, training and development will be put in place to build data literacy across the organisation, empowering individuals to use data confidently in their roles. This focus on building capacity at all levels will help create a culture where data is an integral part of decision-making and problem-solving. As part of this, we are working to make sure that our staff will be able to exploit AI to streamline processes and reduce workloads.

By embedding a data-driven culture within the SU, equipping our staff and student leaders with the tools and confidence they need to use data effectively, the SU will not only enhance our own services but will also play a key role in building our BELONG and INFLUENCE evidence base.