

Hallam Students' Union
Student Voice Report 25/26

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Hallam Students' Union (HSU) Student Voice Report 2025/26 presents an overview of some of the key challenges shaping students' experiences over the past academic year. Drawing on a wide range of research methods, including surveys, focus groups and workshops, this report highlights the complex and often interconnected economic, social and academic pressures facing students.

Across all areas of the findings, a consistent theme emerges: students are navigating increasing demands on their time, finances and wellbeing, with many experiencing significant barriers to fully engaging in university life. While some of these challenges are driven by broader external factors, their impact on the student experience is both immediate and profound.

This report not only outlines these key issues but also identifies areas for meaningful change. Through continued collaboration between Hallam Students' Union and the University, there is opportunity to enhance support, improve communication and implement targeted initiatives that respond directly to student needs. By amplifying student voice, this report aims to inform decision making and contribute to a more inclusive, supportive and accessible university experience.

The Student Voice Report moving forward

The Student Voice Report (SVR) is undergoing a strategic refocus, shifting from a purely operational, recommendation-based style toward an impact-focused approach. While a full strategic framework is currently in production and estimated for completion by August 2026, the immediate priority is providing working groups and committees across SHU and HSU with the specific student insights needed to improve the collective experience.

Under this new model, the SVR will serve as a mechanism for highlighting key themes emerging from student feedback, identifying areas of unmet need, and showcasing where action, progress and positive change are taking place. Moving forward, Student Voice Reporting will be treated as an ongoing process of delivering the right information to the right people at key times, equipping them to make more effective decisions. Ultimately, the SVR will serve as a culmination of positive work, whilst clearly highlighting essential areas for future growth.

1. Time-poor students, the juggle of studies alongside other commitments:

Overwhelmed by work and personal responsibilities, many students face time poverty that limits their engagement and increases the risk of dropping out. To manage these pressures, they continue to call for compact, gap-free timetables and early schedule confirmation to better balance their studies with external commitments. In response, HSU Officers have secured a range of timetabling improvements in partnership with the University to better support students' time and wellbeing.

2. Advocating for student sexual health and mental wellbeing

Students report a gap in health advocacy, with stigma and embarrassment often acting as barriers to accessing sexual health support. Additionally, students' mental health continues to be a significant factor for those who consider dropping out, often navigating challenges by themselves, instead of engaging with existing services .

3. Careers and Employability

While a 53% satisfaction rate suggests a positive baseline for careers support, students indicate room for improvement as they face a volatile job market with declining professional roles. They highlight a shift in needs, moving away from passive advice toward more tangible, direct opportunities like work experience, skill-based volunteering, and formal employer networking.

4. Sense of Belonging and Retention

Students report that loneliness and difficulty making friends are significant reasons for considering withdrawal from university. Many 'non-traditional' students, such as commuters and mature learners, express that the current university social offer feels tailored toward a 'traditional' student demographic.

5. Financial instability and the cost of living

The cost-of-living crisis continues to fundamentally undermine the student experience, forcing many to skip lectures and sacrifice extracurricular activities just to stay afloat. Unpaid placements add a particular layer of strain, creating a 'double hit' of additional expenses and lost income that increasingly drives students toward academic withdrawal.

Time-poor students, the juggle of studies alongside other commitments

Students are facing unprecedented time pressures as they balance work, childcare, placements, with their personal lives. This juggle is significantly undermining the quality of their overall student experience. Hallam Students' Union research shows that 59% of students carry out paid employment alongside their studies, and 18% have regular caring responsibilities¹. This need to work is often driven by a 'financial crisis' with nearly 50% of students struggling to afford a basic standard of living to the point that it impacts their wellbeing². Additionally, 55% of students commute over 30 minutes each way, adding further strain to their daily schedules. These structural barriers are so severe that 32% of students explicitly cite a lack of time as the reason they cannot engage in extracurricular activities, and for some, the pressure of balancing these roles leads them to consider dropping out of university entirely.

"I commute an hour and half in for campus days, and I need to work to afford travel. So if days aren't collectively together or spread out enough, I cannot work to afford travel."

Timetabling could serve as one of the critical remedies for time poverty, by creating 'efficient' schedules that respect the limited windows of time students have available for campus-based learning³. Students advocate for 'compact and continuous' schedules that group teaching sessions together, with 66% prioritising the removal of gaps longer than three hours between classes. Eliminating inefficient days, such as travelling to campus for a single one-hour session, is essential for commuters to manage travel costs and time. Confirming these schedules at least a month in advance is vital, as it provides the certainty 59% of students need to arrange work shifts, childcare, and travel. By providing a consistent routine that does not fluctuate week to week, the university can help students maintain stable employment and a manageable work-life balance.

Following the insights gathered from the survey, HSU Officers have worked in close collaboration with key University stakeholders to secure several significant improvements for the student body. A key structural success is the establishment of the Academic Service Delivery Group, which integrates quality processes across all colleges to ensure any emerging issues are addressed swiftly. Beyond this, student centred principles now inform university policy, specifically focusing on a better balance of time by:

- Committing to eliminate students travelling to campus for 1 hour on-campus teaching.

¹ Cost of Living Survey. Hallam Students' Union. March 2026

² Hallam How Are We Doing? Wave 1. Hallam Students Union. January 2026

<https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/union/publications/HHAWD-Summary-Wave-1.docx>

³ Timetabling Survey. Hallam Students' Union. December 2025

<https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/union/publications/Timetabling-Survey-Report-Updated.pdf>

- Students should only have teaching for 3 days or less.
- Confirmation of timetabling to students at least 4 weeks in advance.
- Gaps cut down to 3 hours maximum.

To monitor the impact of timetabling changes on students, HSU will continue to monitor the issue in the coming academic year in collaboration with SHU.

Advocating for student sexual health and mental wellbeing

With the rise in sexually transmitted infections (STIs) across the country, as well as in Sheffield⁴, HSU looked to explore students' attitudes around STI's and how we can best provide trusted information to support.

Through listening rooms and group discussions with 11 students, the research identified pervasive stigma as a major barrier, with students associating STIs with being 'dirty' or 'unclean' and feeling deep embarrassment when seeking help⁵. Significant demographic and cultural differences were also uncovered; with women reporting feeling higher levels of social judgment than men, and international students from Asian or African backgrounds often viewing sex as a taboo subject and fearing being seen by their own community accessing sexual health services. Furthermore, the report highlights a critical lack of adequate sex education in the UK, noting that current information often relies on 'fear mongering', presenting STIs as life altering catastrophes rather than treatable medicable conditions, which further discourages students from engaging with screening initiatives. Students discussed how they would like to see more support available for sexual health, and often to break the taboo there just needs to be regular on campus exposure to. Additionally, international students discussed how there could be more available for them when the move to the UK to study as there are very different attitudes here in comparison to their home countries.

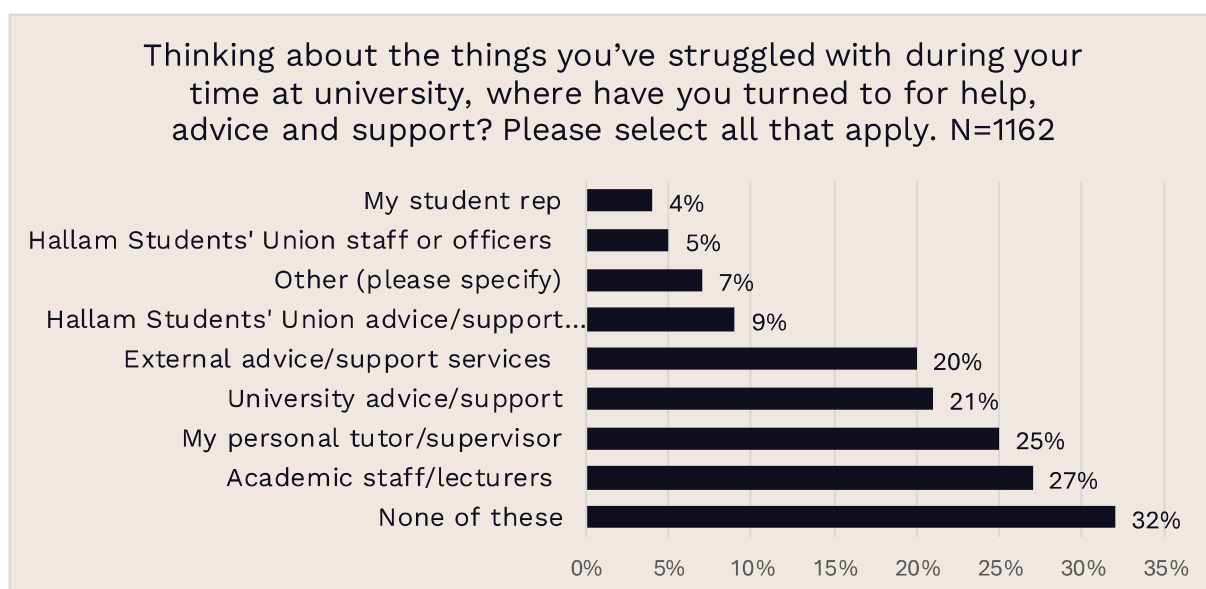
As reported in previous Student Voice Reports, students at Hallam continue to face significant challenges regarding their mental health and wellbeing. For many, these issues are not merely academic hurdles but are significant enough to impact whether they continue with their studies. According to HSU's HHAWD survey, 35% of students report that mental health struggles have had a significant negative impact on their personal wellbeing. This has a direct correlation with retention; of the 28% of students who have considered dropping out, 46% cite mental health as a primary reason.

⁴ Spotlight on sexually transmitted infections in Yorkshire and Humber: 2022 data. UK Health Security Agency. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/sexually-transmitted-infections-yorkshire-and-humber-data/spotlight-on-sexually-transmitted-infections-in-yorkshire-and-humber-2022-data>

⁵ Sexual Health Workshops. Hallam Students' Union. December 2025
<https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/union/publications/Sexual-Health-Workshop-Report.pdf>

“I'd really appreciate more consistent communication about support services and opportunities, especially early in the semester when everything feels overwhelming. More visibility around mental health resources, academic support, and community building events would make a big difference. It would also help if the SU created more spaces for students to share feedback throughout the year, so support can be tailored to what we actually need as things change.”

The data on help-seeking behaviour, as shown in the figure below, highlights a clear preference for familiar academic contacts over centralised support services. Survey findings indicate that students most often seek help from academic staff and lecturers (27%) or their personal tutor/supervisor (25%). Notably, the largest group, 32% of students, reported that they had not used any of the listed services, despite a range of support options being available. In addition, 33% of respondents felt they did not receive the help they needed. Together, these findings suggest that, while support does exist, there may be gaps in awareness, visibility, or communication, leaving a substantial proportion of students unsure of how to access appropriate help or navigate challenges without adequate support.

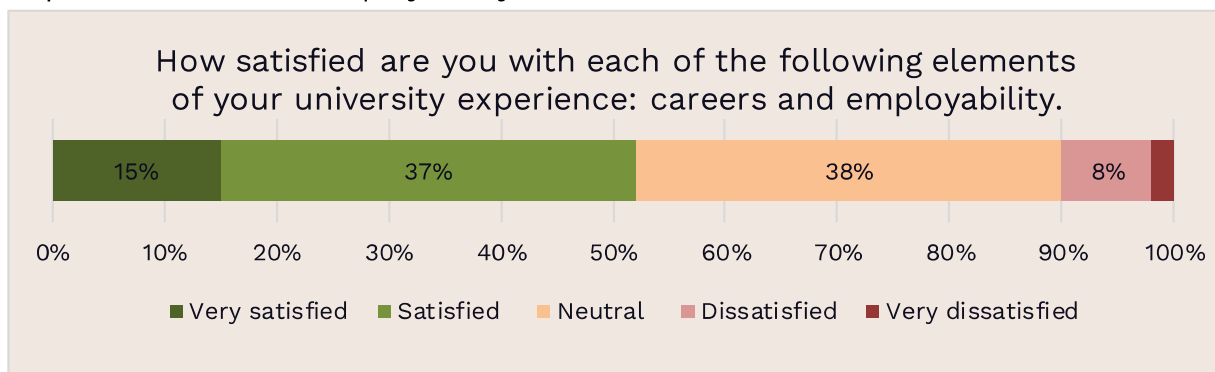


The findings highlight several key challenges affecting students' wellbeing and engagement with support. Stigma around sexual health, shaped by embarrassment, cultural taboos and fear of judgment, limits help-seeking, while gaps in sex education leave many without clear, practical understanding. Mental health difficulties also have a significant impact, including on students' continuation of their studies. Although support services exist, many students either do not access them or feel their needs are unmet, pointing to gaps in awareness, accessibility and perceived effectiveness.

Careers and employability

As the post-pandemic hiring surge officially unwinds, the latest 'What do graduates do? 2025/26 report'⁶ reveals a cooling market in which full-time employment has dipped to 56.4% and unemployment has climbed to 6.2%. With professional level roles also seeing a notable decline to 71.9%, Hallam graduates are entering a more volatile and competitive landscape. There is an increasing gap between the current service provision and the heightened support students now expect to navigate this competitive landscape.

Current student sentiment mirrors these external pressures, with satisfaction for careers and employability support sitting at 53%. While this represents a positive baseline of majority satisfaction, it suggests significant room for growth, particularly as a further 38% of respondents remain 'neutral.' This high level of neutrality indicates that a substantial portion of the student body has yet to feel a tangible impact from current employability initiatives.



This pragmatism is driven by awareness of the “unstable and competitive job market” and the mounting difficulties of securing stable employment post-graduation. From the HHAWD qualitative data, students are looking for a “robust offer” that includes direct work experience, skill-based volunteering and employer networking. The University’s new Career Promise, which guarantees applied learning and professional safety nets, acts as a direct response to these needs. To ensure these commitments are met, HSU will continue to monitor the issues students have around careers and employability, providing independent oversight on behalf of the study body.

“If Hallam Students' Union offered more hands-on opportunities to build real-world skills — such as networking events with industry professionals, trading or investment competitions, and interactive workshops that link directly to our courses — I'd definitely get more involved. I'd love to see more initiatives that help students connect academic learning with practical experience, while also creating a social and supportive community atmosphere.”

These findings signal a necessary shift toward a model of tangible integrated support. Rather than passive signposting, students are craving direct pathways to the workplace, specifically through networking and experiential learning. By

⁶ What do graduates do? 2025/26. Graduate Market Trends.

https://graduatemarkettrends.cdn.prismic.io/graduatemarkettrends/aSRpF2GnmrmGqMHq_what-do-graduates-do-2025-26.pdf

reducing the disconnect between academic guidance and professional practice, the University and HSU can deliver the practical edge that graduates now view as a survival tool in a competitive landscape.

Sense of belonging and retention

In the Higher Education sector, fostering a sense of belonging is no longer viewed as an optional social enhancement but as a strategic necessity for student success⁷. The 2024 HEPI Student Wellbeing Survey⁸ highlights that a sense of belonging acts as a critical buffer against the pressures of university life, students who feel they do not belong are twice as likely to report feeling ‘constantly stressed’ compared to those who do (30% vs 16%).

Findings from the HHAWD survey reveal that Hallam students share this desire for social connection, with many explicitly calling for ‘community building events’ and ‘informal, low-pressure activities’ to help them form friendships. However, structural and psychological barriers persist. Approximately 15% of students cite a lack of confidence as a barrier to engagement, whilst ‘non-traditional’ groups (including commuters and mature students) often feel the current offer is built for a ‘traditional’ student, which further hinders their sense of community.

The effects of a diminished sense of belonging are most clearly seen in student retention rates. Among Hallam students who have considered dropping out, 17% stated this was due to loneliness and 14% cited struggling to make friends.

“...I don’t go to many events as I feel like everyone is going as pre-existing groups, and it would be nice if there was an event where the aim is to make friends”

Overall, the evidence highlights a clear gap between the recognised importance of student belonging and the varied reality of students’ experiences. While there is a strong expressed desire for connection, barriers such as confidence, differing student circumstances and a perceived focus on a ‘traditional’ student experience limit engagement for some groups. These disparities are reflected in feelings of loneliness and considerations of withdrawals, suggesting that the current sense of community is not experienced evenly across the student populations.

⁷ Fostering belonging in higher education: Implications for student retention and wellbeing. Advance HE. March 2024. [https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/fostering-belonging-higher-education-implications-student-retention-and-wellbeing#:~:text=In%20the%20Higher%20Education%20\(HE,has%20become%20a%20strategic%20necessity.](https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/news-and-views/fostering-belonging-higher-education-implications-student-retention-and-wellbeing#:~:text=In%20the%20Higher%20Education%20(HE,has%20become%20a%20strategic%20necessity.)

⁸ Link between Stress and Belonging Uncovered, and Student Mentors Needed. Higher Education Policy Institute. July 2024. <https://www.hepi.ac.uk/2024/07/05/link-between-stress-and-belonging-uncovered-and-student-mentors-needed/>

Financial instability and the cost-of-living

As reported in the last Student Voice Report, the cost-of-living continues to have an unprecedented impact on Hallam Students, as it does with everyone across the country.

Pay the Placement is a campaign founded by Essex Students' Union calling for nursing students to be paid for their placement. Detailing that every day, they deliver frontline care in hospitals, clinics and communities, doing the same vital work as paid staff, whilst still covering their tuition fees⁹. HSU's cost-of-living research¹⁰ suggests that unpaid placements are placing a significant financial and emotional strain on students, intensifying the wider cost-of-living pressures. Qualitative responses repeatedly highlight the hidden costs associated with placements, such as travel, parking and additional food or laundry expenses, with students describing these as 'draining' and difficult to sustain. Several respondents also pointed out that full time placement schedules limit their ability to take on part time work, effectively removing a source of income. Others emphasised inequality, noting that students from less affluent backgrounds are disproportionately excluded from opportunities like placements on internships due to their unpaid nature. HSU will be supporting this campaign for the following academic year, with the aim of improving the financial situation for nursing students.

"Food costs have shot up, as a student who does a placement which costs £70 each week when on placement- finding that money to be able to go to placement, as well as have money to be able to buy food, is impossible, as well as having the right money for rent it's a big struggle and has made a huge impact on my mental health."

The crisis also continues to have an impact on the students social and academic experience whilst studying. Social activities hosted by the Students' Union are often essential lifelines that help students build a sense of belonging and meet new people. Despite these benefits, 80% of students have skipped extracurricular events hosted by the HSU to some extent. This gap suggests that while these opportunities are vital for social integration, there are significant barriers preventing most students from participating. Academic events similarly give students the opportunity to meet new people on their course, as well as enhance their learning and knowledge on the subject, however 71% report skipping these to some extent.

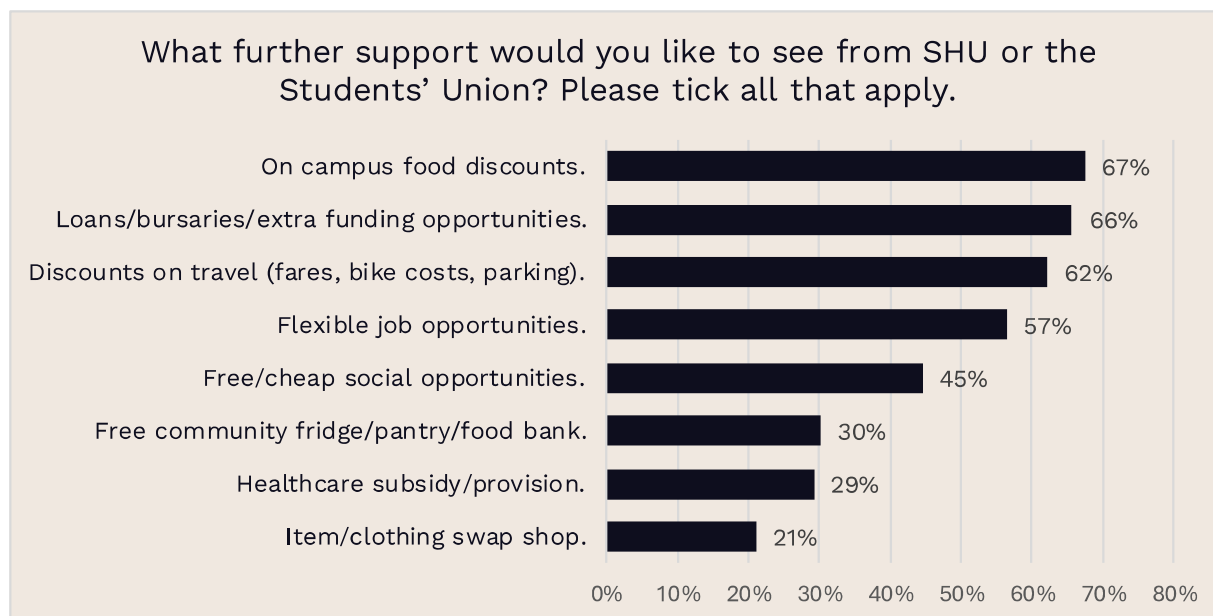
As well as the impact on the social side of the student experience, students have reported the significant impact it has had on the academic side. With 41% of students surveyed report that they have skipped teaching to some extent due to rising costs and 76% reporting that rising costs have led to a negative impact on their academic experience.

⁹ Pay The Placement. Essex Students' Union. <https://www.essexstudent.com/paytheplacement/>

¹⁰ Cost of Living. Hallam Students' Union. March 2026

“I need to work all the time, so tired that no resources or money to actually go somewhere, visit family, all this stuff. Because of the additional work and family help I'm doing I'm falling behind in the studies, don't have time to find placement opportunities or do portfolio, I'm just tired and depressed and all the stuff I'm trying to sell is not selling and I'm just losing money”

In terms of support from HSU and the university, the below figure indicates students are primarily seeking practical financial support to ease day to day living costs. The highest demand is for on campus food discounts, followed closely by increased access to bursaries, funding and travel discounts, highlighting the significant pressure of basic expenses. There is also a strong interest in flexible job opportunities, suggesting students want sustainable ways to balance income with study.



Project	Methodology	Sample size
Hallam, How Are We Doing? Wave 1.	All student survey covering the general student experience.	1,162
Cost of Living Survey 2026	All student survey covering the impact of the cost-of-living on students.	1,124
Timetabling Survey	All student survey covering timetabling priorities and the impact of timetables on wider student life.	994
Sexual Health Workshops	30-minute listening room, followed by a focus group/workshop looking at stigmas and where students may seek help.	11