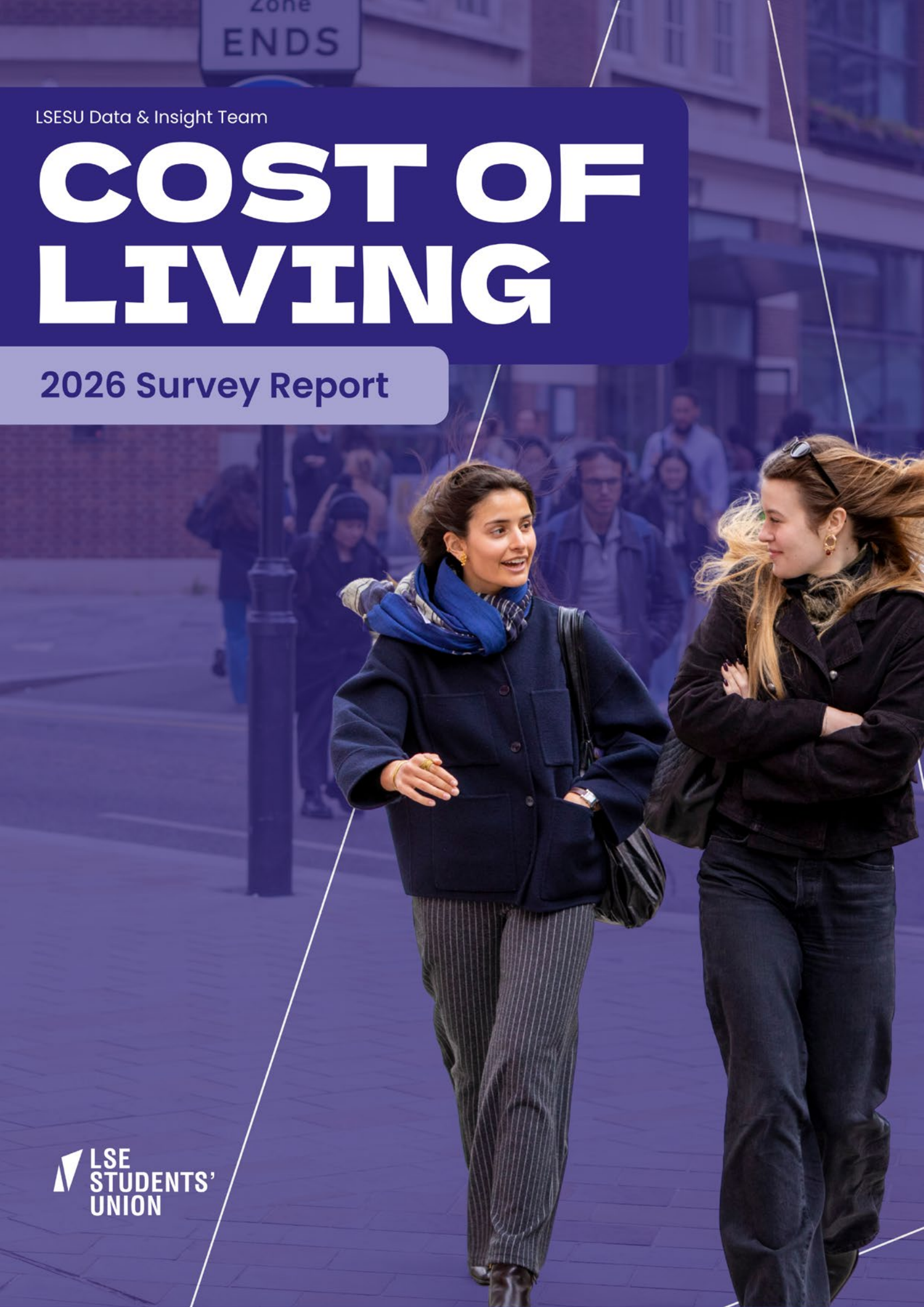
LSESU Data & Insight Team

COST OF LIVING

2026 Survey Report



LSE STUDENTS' UNION

INTRODUCTION

Prompted by the work of our previous Activities and Communities Officer, LSESU Engagement Team set out to investigate the impact of the cost of living crisis on our students. Instead of guessing, we wanted to hear from students about their experiences and see the key areas of intervention needed from us and LSE.

This work was partially influenced by the rise of UK Student Unions adopting the Basic Needs framework popular amongst American universities, with this survey partially referencing the framework. However, after consultation with internal team members, we decided to be slightly more ambitious as we considered LSE's status as a world-class institution. This prompted questions delving further into how a student's financial status impacts their mental health and sense of ambition.

This report tackles how different student groups report being impacted by the cost of living, compares answers across groups to identify key areas of struggle, and provides organisational priorities to consider for the new academic year.

Highlight key:

Underrepresented	Blue
Over represented	Green
Slightly over or under	Yellow

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METHODOLOGY

This survey was comprised of 43 total questions, with extended sections for Postgraduate Taught/Research students, International students, and commuter students to delve a little further into their experience. The average response time was quite long at 28.37 minutes, resulting in some detailed responses. However, the response rate was relatively low at 319 responses. This survey ran during exam season (May and June), as well as during the weeks where student footfall was lessening on campus. We will be investigating social media and newsletter metrics to see how we can improve our approach to the cost of living survey, as the Annual Student Survey 2026 was published at the end of June and resulted in 500+ responses.

Of 319 responses, 310 rows were available for export, and 294 rows matched to a Student ID. Student IDs were manually input by the participants, which may account for the loss of 14 rows. This number gives us an n-score of 3.4% as our reporting benchmark.

I imported the survey answer spreadsheet and respondent demographics spreadsheet into Jupyter Notebook, where I first cleaned and merged the tables, cut financial situation by demographic information, and conducted the quantitative and qualitative analysis of the results.

Groups we cut answers by:

Those who report having dependents against those who do not

'Struggling' and 'Managing' students were compared

Those who answered 'I am struggling and often have to choose between basic needs' or 'I am in serious financial difficulty' were coded as 'Struggling' and those who answered 'I am comfortable and able to save money' as well as 'I am managing but have very little left over' were coded as 'Managing'

Struggling students: 64, Managing students: 255

- By department
- By ethnicity
- By student type
- By accommodation type
- By fee status

BENCHMARKING

Overall Cohort Demographics

Of the survey respondents, this is what the overall cohort looked like:

Age range

- 18 – 21: 39.1% (-6.3% from proportion at school level)
- 22 – 25: 31.3% (-9%)
- 26 – 30: 19.7% (-9.6%)
- Over 30: 10.1% (+6.5%)

18 – 21 year olds and 21 – 25 year olds were slightly underrepresented compared to the school population, mainly as Over 30 year olds were quite overrepresented.

Department

- Law School: 10.5% (+3.1% from proportion at school level)
- Management: 8.8% (-1.6%)
- International Development: 7.1% (+3.6%)
- Government: 6.8% (-0.1%)
- Social Policy: 6.8% (+3.4%)
- Psychological and Behavioural Science: 6.1% (+2.7%)
- Economics: 5.4% (-3.4%)
- Geography and Environment: 5.1% (-0.1%)
- Accounting: 4.4% (-1%)
- Sociology: 4.4% (+1.1%)
- Health Policy: 4.1% (+2.1%)
- Anthropology: 3.7% (+1.4%)
- Media and Communications: 3.4% (+0.5%)
- International History: 3.4% (-0.7%)
- All others <3.4%

International Development, Social Policy, and Law School students were overrepresented by at least 3 percentage points in this sample compared to their proportional make-up of the student body. Psychological and Behavioural Science and Health Policy students also answered at 2 percentage points higher than their school-level proportion, showing a strong turnout from the social sciences.

Meanwhile, the most underrepresented department was Economics at 3.4% below their school population proportion. Management also was slightly underrepresented, followed by Accounting.

Ethnicity (Narrow)

- Asian – Indian or Indian British: 19.7%
- Any other White background: 16%
- White – English, Scottish, Welsh, Northern Irish, or British: 15%
- Asian – Chinese or Chinese British: 14%
- Any other Asian background: 7.5%
- Black – African or African British: 5.4%
- Any other Mixed or Multiple ethnic background: 4.4%
- Any other ethnic background: 3.7%
- All others <3.4%

Ethnicity (Wide)

- Asian – 45.6% (-2.9%)
- White – 32.3% (-0.3%)
- Black – 6.1% (+2.4%)
- Mixed – 5.8% (-1%)
- Other – 6.5% (+2%)
- Unknown – 3.7% (-0.1%)

At a wide level the sample shows, proportionate to the school's population, an underrepresentation of Asian students and overrepresentation of Black students. We also saw more Other students filling out this survey, with White and Unknown students participating in relatively proportionate numbers to their overall population.

Fees status (Narrow)

- Overseas Resident: 57.1%
- UK Resident: 32%
- Overseas EU Resident: 7.8%
- All others <3.4%

Fees status (Wide)

- Overseas: 64.9% (-3.7%)
- Home: 34.6% (+3.2%)

We can see in this sample, Overseas students were slightly underrepresented and Home students were slightly overrepresented.

Mode of study

- Full-time: 94.9% (-1.5%)
- Part-time: 4.1% (+0.5%)

Full-time students were in the vast majority, though the Part-time student percentage largely reflects their proportion at school-level.

Nationality

- England: 33.3%
- India: 12.6%
- USA: 7.5%
- China: 6.8%
- All others <3.4%

Sex

- Female: 72.1% (+15.3%)
- Male: 27.2% (-15.7%)

Student Type

- Postgraduate Taught: 55.4% (+7.1%)
- Undergraduate: 40.5% (-5.7%)
- Postgraduate Research: 3.7% (-1.8%)

Year of Study

- First year: 71.1% (+5.3%)
- Second year: 19.1% (+1.3%)
- Third year: 8.8% (-5.5%)

ANALYSIS BY QUESTION
WHO IS STRUGGLING?

First of all, we investigated what students self-reported for Question 3 ("Thinking about this academic year so far, how would you describe your overall financial situation?"). We did this by breaking the responses down by the respondents' department, ethnicity, student type, and fee status.

Department

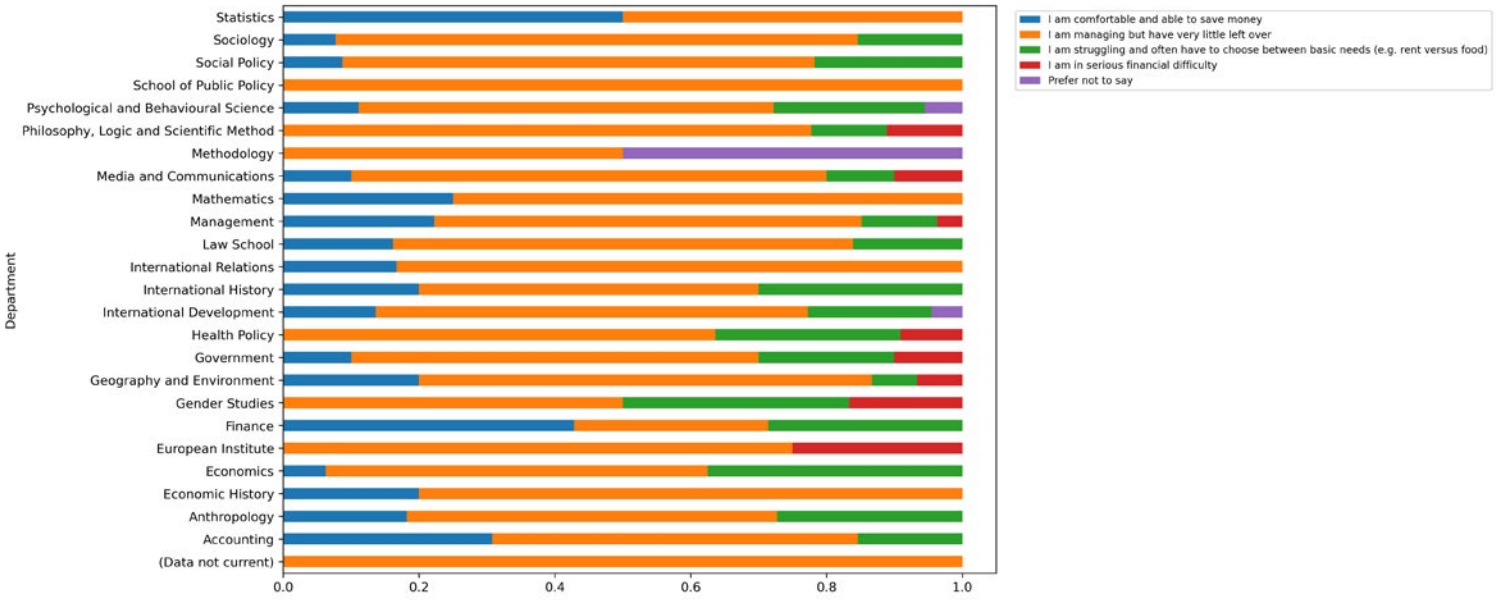


Figure X.X Question 3 by Department

We found that the departments with the most students reporting that they are in serious financial difficulty or struggling are:

- Gender Studies
- Health Policy
- International History
- Philosophy, Logic, and Scientific Method

Ethnicity

Asian and White respondents have the largest sample sizes and can be compared slightly more confidently here. Patterns for Black, Mixed, Other and Unknown respondents should be treated as indicative only due to their small base sizes. These findings may point to areas for further investigation, rather than providing conclusive evidence of differences between ethnicity groups.

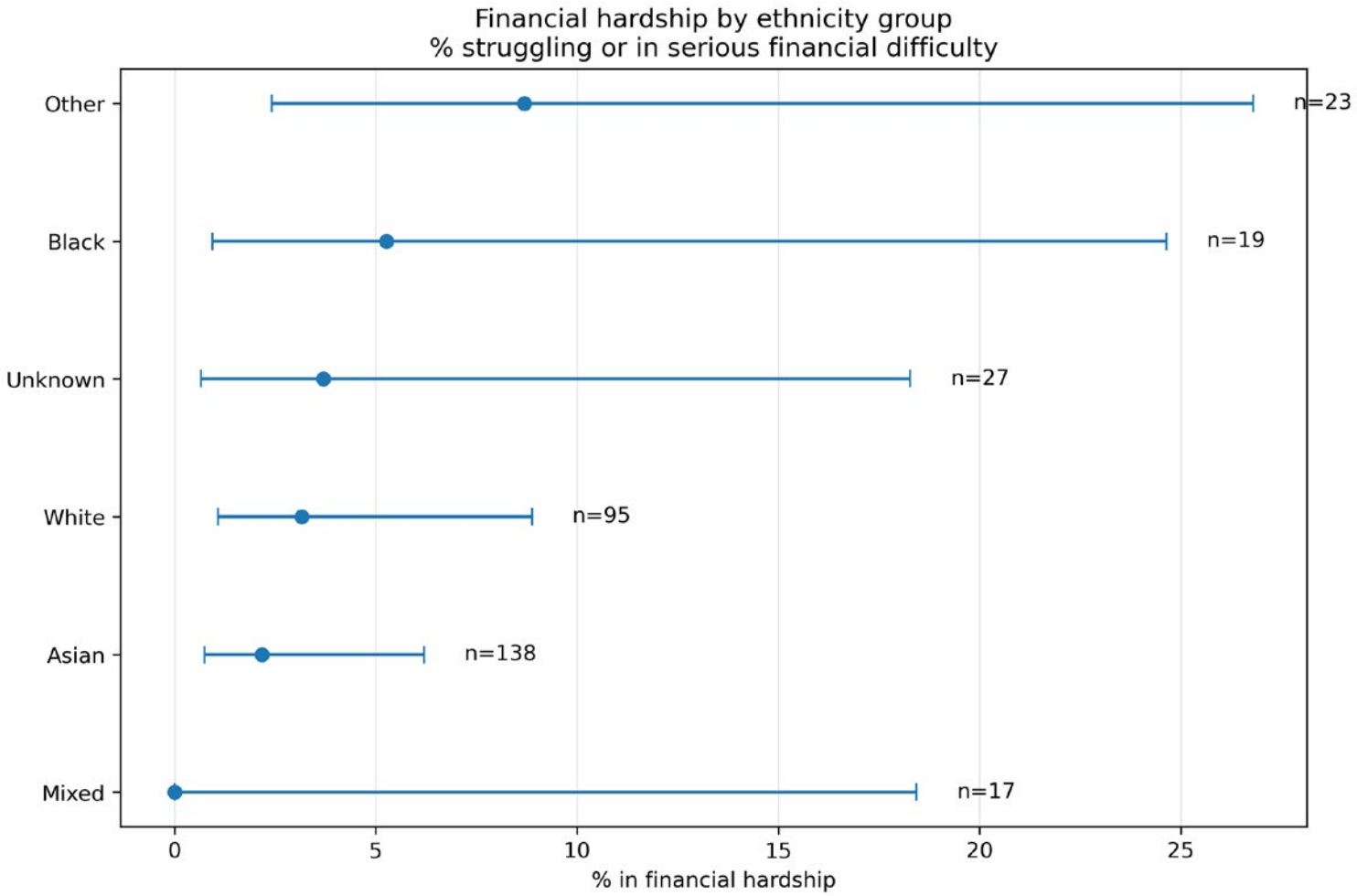


Figure X.X Financial hardship by ethnicity group

With this in mind, I took the approach of using a binary hardship rate by ethnicity group and employing confidence intervals. We can see the n scores of Other, Black, Unknown, and Mixed students are small and therefore the confidence intervals are larger. Whilst we see tighter intervals around Asian and White students, all of the intervals overlap and so it is unlikely this survey can demonstrate meaningful differences in hardship rates based on ethnicity at these sample sizes.

Student Type

Slightly more confidently, we can compare Undergraduate (UG) and Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students as their sample sizes are closer in number, at 120 and 169 respondents respectively. Postgraduate Research (PGR) respondents' results are also shown, but are from a much smaller sample – therefore, similar to the ethnicity groups, hard to compare.

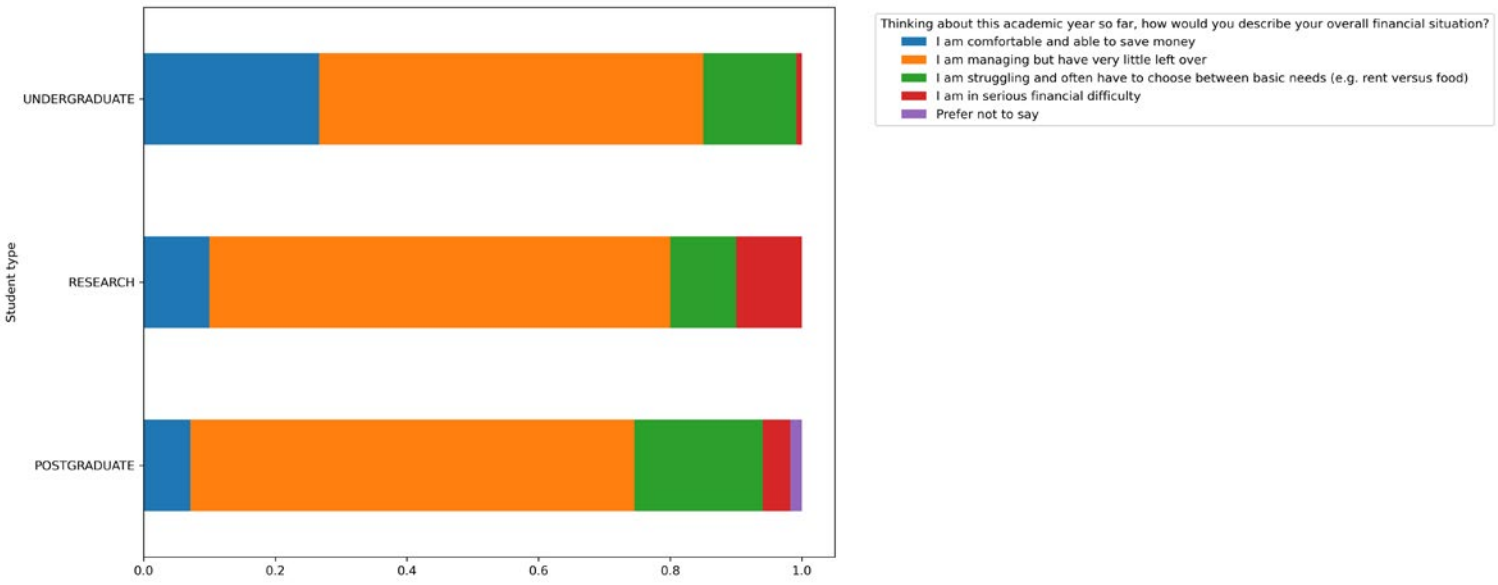


Figure X.X Financial situation by student type

The majority of students report being managing or comfortable. From the survey results, we see that PGT students report struggling (19.5%) or being in serious financial difficulty (4.1%) in a greater proportion than UG students, with 14.2% of UG students struggling and only 0.8% reporting being in serious financial difficulty. Proportionally, more UG students report being comfortable and able to save money, at 26.7% of UGs to 7.1% of PGT students.

Fee Status

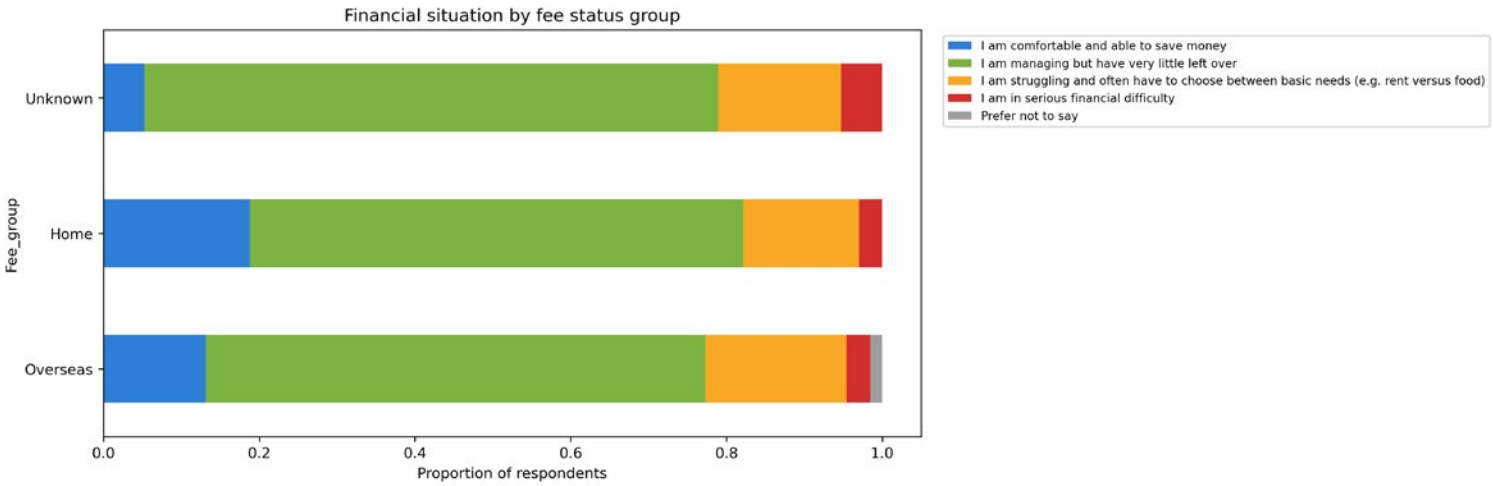


Figure X.X Financial situation by fee status group

Overseas students make up the majority of the survey's sample, double that of Home students. However, we know from the demographic breakdown that both groups were represented within 4pp of their proportion at School level. We also know that Overseas students were slightly underrepresented and Home students were slightly overrepresented. Therefore, the uneven group sizes are expected.

We can also see that largely fee status seems to have little relationship with a student's financial situation. The biggest gaps between Home and Overseas students are those reporting they're comfortable (Home students are +5.7% on Overseas students) and reporting they're struggling (Overseas students are +3.3% on Home students). Otherwise, 'managing but have very little left over' students from both groups are within a percentage point of one another, and exactly the same percentage from both groups report being in serious financial difficulty (3%).

WHAT ARE STUDENTS FREQUENTLY AVOIDING OR DOING BECAUSE OF THE COST-OF-LIVING CRISIS?

For ease of analysis, we grouped all of the frequency questions available to all respondents (excluding PGT/PGR/International/Commuter sections) in the survey to see how students self-report their behaviour. These questions look at what students are frequently doing, or foregoing, because of the cost-of-living crisis.

Overall, we can see most respondents are 'Never' or 'Rarely' exhibiting the behaviours associated with financial strain (identified by the basic needs framework) from Q4 ("In the past academic year, how often have you done any of the following because of financial pressure?"). From the overall cohort, we can see the behaviours most commonly exhibited are:

- Missing a social event/activity they wanted to attend
- Borrowing money from family, friends, or credit

Taking on paid work to cover basic costs

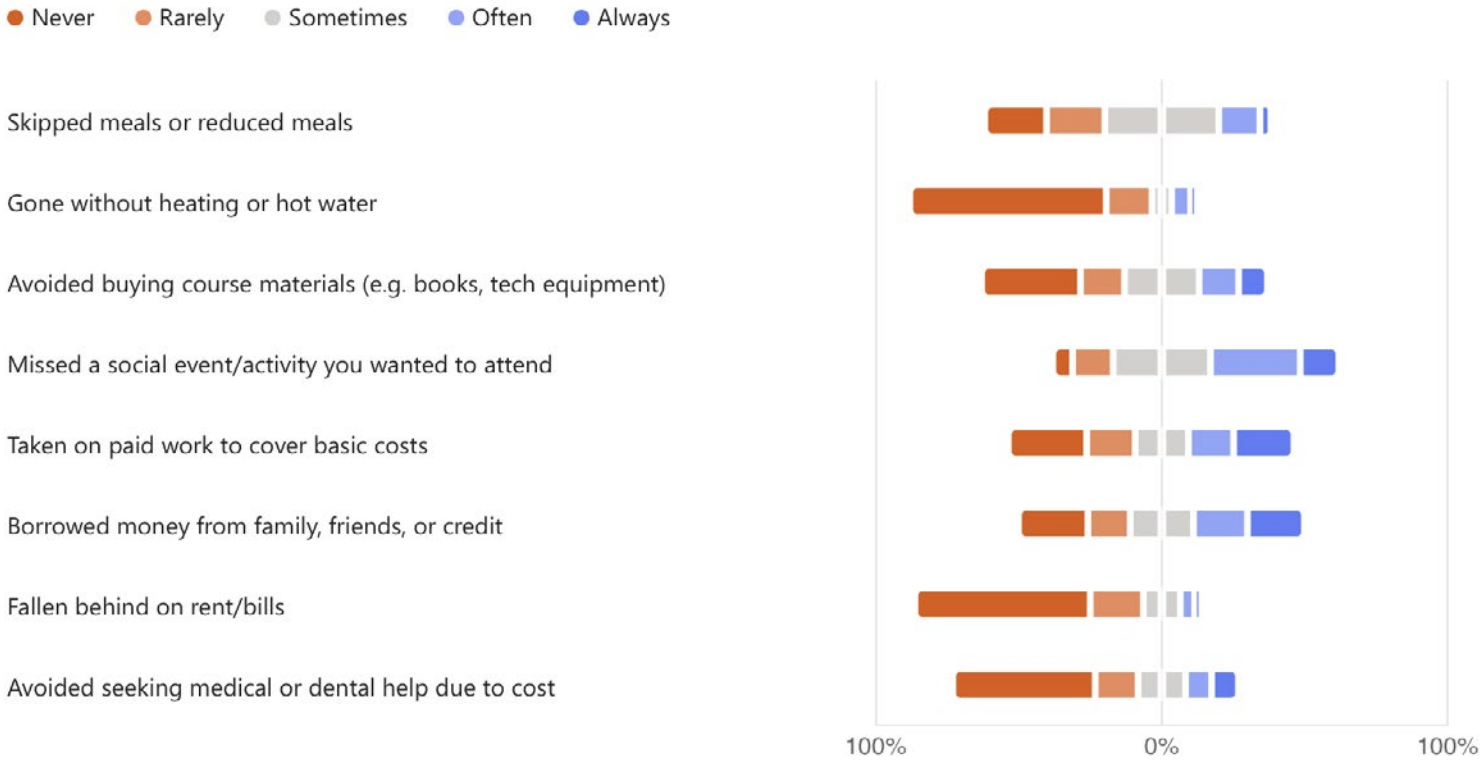


Figure X.X Question 4 Overall Cohort Responses

Managing or Struggling

When breaking this down further by whether students are 'Managing' or 'Struggling' (see Methodology section for how these groups were coded), however, we can see a slightly more nuanced view.

Looking only at the behaviours they do 'Often' or 'Always', we see some stark differences between the groups.

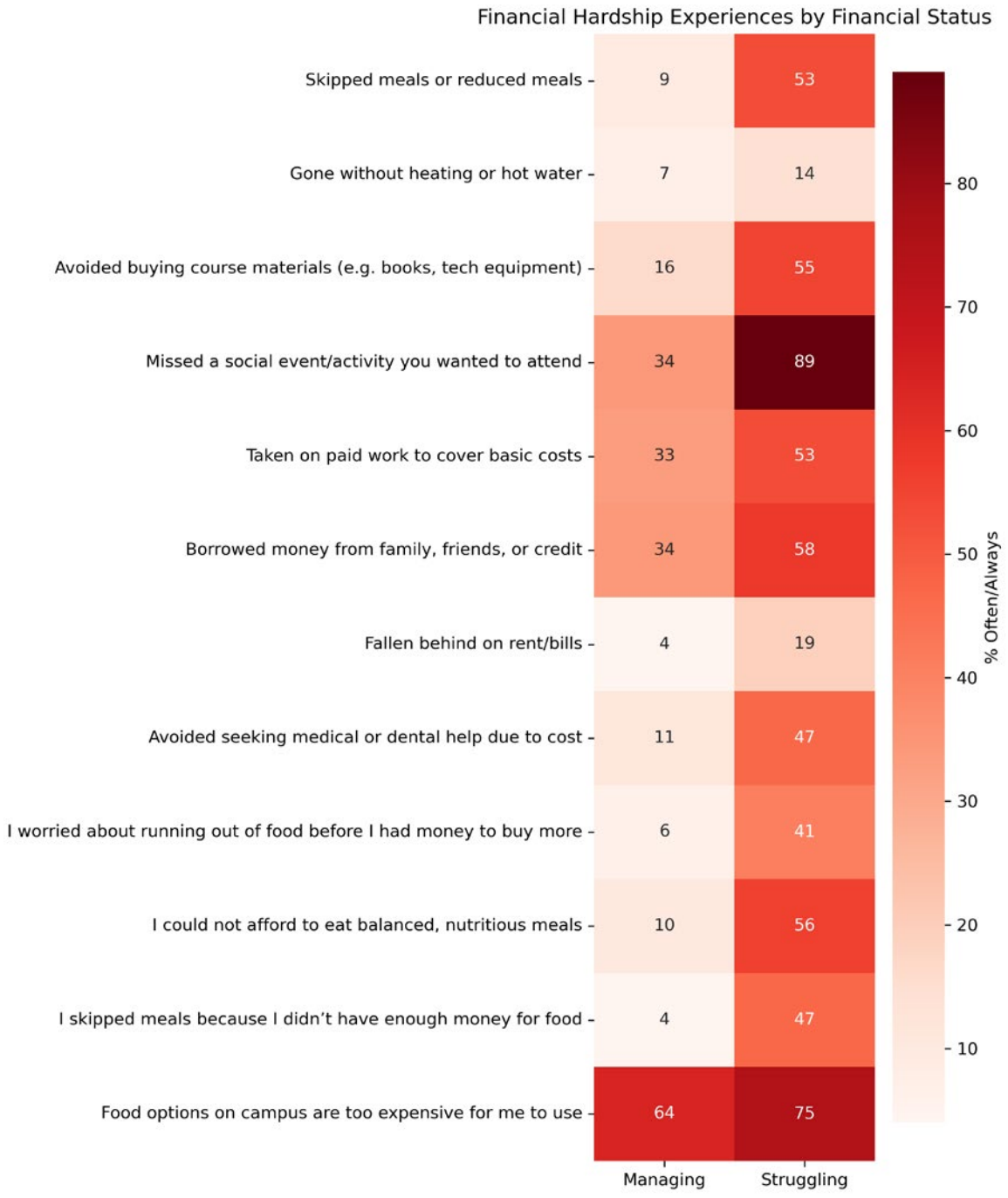


Figure X.X Financial Hardship Experience by Financial Status Heatmap in %

The biggest gaps between the groups we can see are:

- Missing a social event/activity they wanted to attend (+55%)

Whilst this placed comparatively high for the Managing students, it was much more of an issue for Struggling students. As this is one of our biggest offerings, this is very worrying that many students forego social events/activities due to financial pressure.

- I could not afford to eat balanced, nutritious meals (+46%)
- Skipped meals or reduced meals (+44%)

These food-based behaviours are rarely exhibited by Managing students, but often/always reported by over 50% of Struggling students.

Both groups show these behaviours in a significant number:

- Borrow money from family, friends, or credit
- Take on paid work to cover basic costs

Things that do not flag for a significant portion of either group:

- Gone without heating or water
- Fallen behind on rent/bills

Accommodation Type

When cut by accommodation type, University halls versus Private/Other accommodation, there is very limited variation in response. Both groups proportionally answer very similarly. This suggests that accommodation type is not a significant factor contributing to differences in behaviour.

Students with Dependents

However, when we look at students who have dependents who rely on them financially versus those who do not, we can see more gaps in responses.
It must be noted that the 'dependents' subset is must smaller than the 'no dependents' group, so Wilson confidence intervals were used in the analysis.

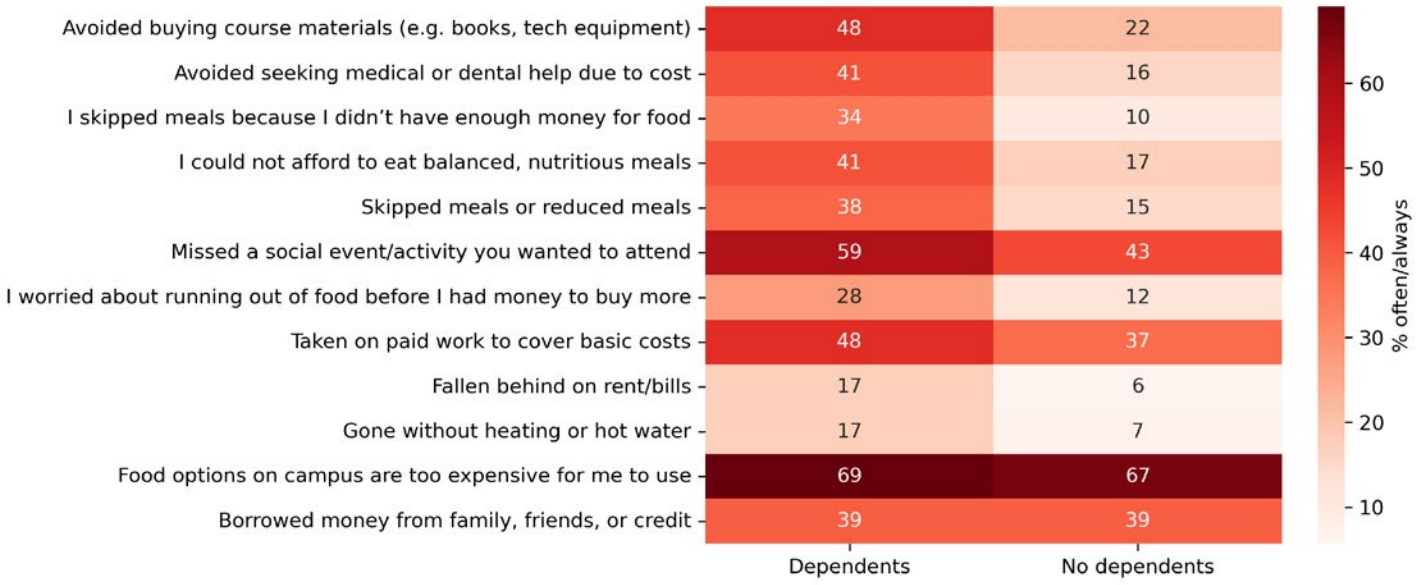


Figure X.X Financial Hardship Experience by Dependent Status

When we look at the gaps between responses, we see that both groups coalesce around food options being too expensive on campus, as well as reporting a common behaviour of borrowing money.

The widest gaps occur where students with dependents forego necessities, such avoiding buying course materials, (+27%), avoiding medical help (+26%), skipping/reducing meals (+23%), and being unable to afford balanced meals (+24%). Students with dependents are three and a half times more likely to skip meals due to financial hardship.

When comparing Wilson intervals against the value for 'No dependents', there are plausible differences between the top 5 statements in the graph (course materials, seeking medical help, etc.). However, missed social events and falling behind on rent have too few respondents for us to confidently cite a real difference between the groups.

Something interesting may be that there is a gap of only 11.6% between the groups for taking on paid work: something we may have expected from these students with dependents if they were simply poorer. However, this figure is suggesting those with dependents cannot work their way out of their struggle: their caring responsibilities may be restricting the hours they have available to work. Instead, their adjustment to tackle their hardship is consumption-focused instead: they avoid healthcare bills, varied meals, and sometimes meals entirely.

We should also note that students with dependents skew older and Postgraduate, so it is hard to isolate whether their dependents are the sole cause of their hardship behaviours, or if it is the nature of their student type/ responsibilities.

Overall

Overall, from the frequency questions we can see the behaviours that most students exhibit during the cost of living crisis are:

- Missing a social event/activity they wanted to attend
- Borrowing money from family, friends, or credit
- Taking on paid work to cover basic costs

This is particularly exacerbated for Struggling students. We can see the number one thing students sacrifice are social events and activities. This is a clear risk to the SU's offering.

WHAT IS SUPPLEMENTING STUDENTS' INCOME THIS ACADEMIC YEAR?

Students were invited to select all the sources that were supplementing their income for this academic year. Family support was the primary reported source, at 23% of total responses with 66.8% of individual respondents picking it. This was followed by Savings at 20% of total responses, and 57.4% of individual respondents choosing it. Part-time work (during term-time) was the third at 14% of total responses, with 41.3% of individual respondents selecting the option.

Part-time work (holidays only) followed this with a significant step down at 8% of total responses and 21.6% of individual respondents. Perhaps due to the smaller number of Home students than Overseas students represented in the sample, Student tuition loan (UK) fell to number 5 in this ranking at 7% of total responses, and 19.4% of individual respondents. Though, this is considerably lower than the 34.6% of students who completed the survey who were Home students.

The overall ranking by individual respondents:

1. Family support (66.8%)
2. Savings (57.4%)
3. Part-time work (during term-time) (41.3%)
4. Part-time work (holidays only) (21.6%)
5. Student tuition loan (UK) (19.4%)

Very few respondents selected:

- LSESU hardship fund
- Government benefits (e.g. housing benefit)
- None of the above

We will come onto the accessibility of the LSESU hardship fund in later sections.

WHAT UNPREDICTABLE COSTS ARE STUDENTS FACING?

Of the 190 students (59.6% of respondents) who said they had faced an unpredictable, one-off cost, these were the top categories the costs fell into:

1. Laptop/phone replacement (19% total responses, 37% individual respondents)
2. Travel/transport emergency costs (18% total responses, 35.8% individual respondents)
3. Accommodation-related costs (e.g. moving vans) (16% total responses, 32.1% individual respondents)
4. Healthcare (13% total responses, 25.3% individual respondents)
5. Clothing for interviews/placements (10% total responses, 19.5% individual respondents)

With relatively few students reporting the following were one-off costs:

- Software for a required course
- Legal costs
- Any other tech replacement
- Printing/binding

Other open text answers that came up for those who found the costs a financial burden were mostly family-related (dependents/childcare, parents losing jobs, etc.), whereas those who found the costs generally manageable spoke mostly about clubs and societies.

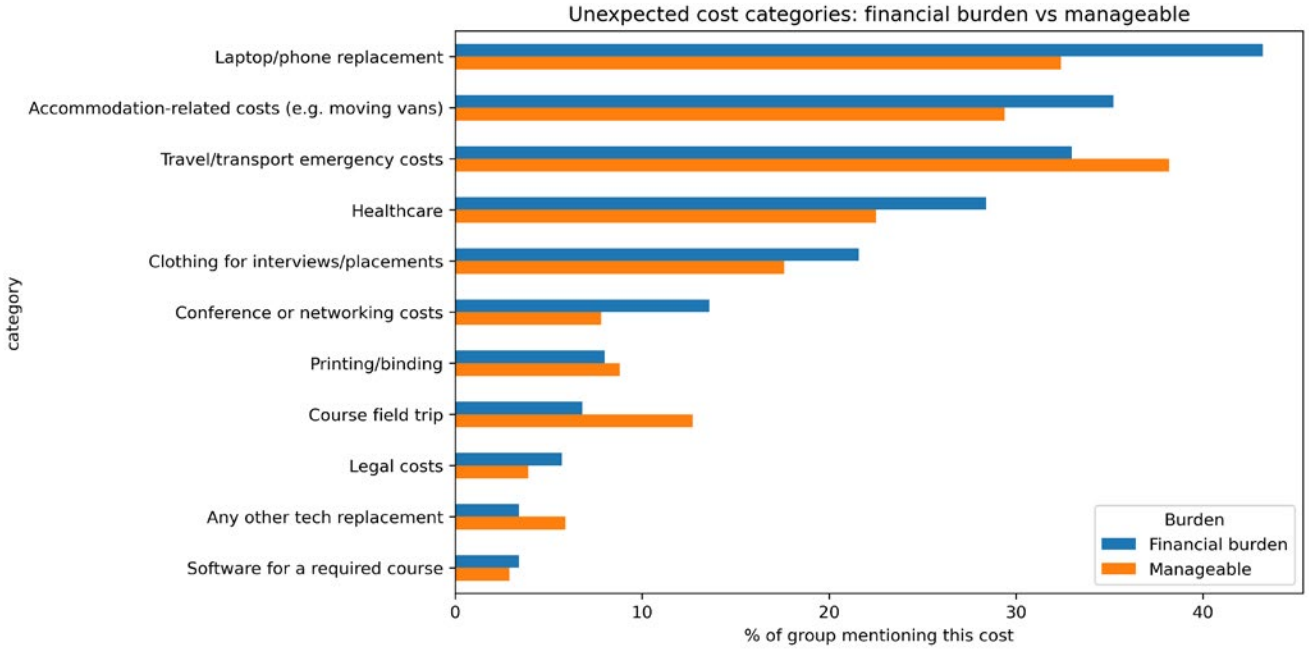


Figure X.X Unexpected costs by category, financial burden vs manageable costs

We can see that, when split into those who reported the costs were a financial burden versus those who said the costs were manageable, the categories leading for 'manageable' are travel/transport emergency costs, course field trips, any other tech replacement, and printing/binding.

Laptop/phone replacement is by far the biggest category for those deemed a financial burden, followed by accommodation costs instead of travel costs when split by burden.

WHAT INTERNATIONAL STUDENT-SPECIFIC ISSUES ARE IMPACTING OUR OVERSEAS STUDENTS THE MOST FINANCIALLY?

When asked about issues specific to the international student experience, the problems that students said had the greatest impact on their finances were:

1. Exchange rate fluctuations between GDP and their home currency (75% agree in total, within this figure 51.9% strongly agree)
2. Cost of travel to and from their home country (72.1% agree in total, 45.7% strongly agree)
3. Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) costs (66.8% agree in total, 42.8% strongly agree)
4. Visa application or renewal fees (63.3% agree in total, 34.8% strongly agree)
5. Paying large upfront costs in the UK (e.g. deposit) (59.6% agree in total, 37.5% strongly agree)

Since the Renters' Rights Act 2026, number 5 is unlikely to remain a prevalent issue as landlords are now prohibited from accepting more than one month's rent in advance of signing the tenancy agreement.

Exchange rate fluctuations are very hard to mitigate. Cost of travel home is a big burden, and not being able to see family/support network and loved ones can have a detrimental impact on a student. The current Immigration Health Surcharge for students is £776 a year, a huge expense on top of visa fees.

However, 42.2% agreed or strongly agreed that the university had given them realistic information about living costs before they arrived, with 21.4% disagreeing. Less students felt confident navigating the UK's financial systems (26.7%), such as banking, than those who didn't feel confident (32.5%), though the majority is not decisive by any means.

Plus, 54.8% of the Overseas students disagreed with the statement "I worry about not being able to afford staying and completing my course", and 56.8% (34% strongly) disagreed with the statement "I have considered leaving the UK to finish my studies due to financial pressures". However, 22.4% agreed with both of these statements. This is a group we should be worried about.

HOW HAS FINANCIAL WORRY AFFECTED OUR STUDENTS?

When asked about how often financial worry has affected students' sleep, ability to concentrate, physical health, mental health, relationships, and sense of aspiration, these are the areas students said were Often or Always affected:

- My sense of aspiration (e.g. academic, career) (38.2% agreed, 34.3% disagreed)
- My mental health (e.g. anxiety, low mood) (38% agreed, 35.1% disagreed)
- My ability to concentrate on my studies (26.5% agreed, 43% disagreed)

When we look at the gaps between students who are Managing versus Struggling, we see mental health places above aspiration for areas affected by financial worry for Struggling students, whilst for Managing students 'physical health' replaces concentration in their top three by a thin margin.

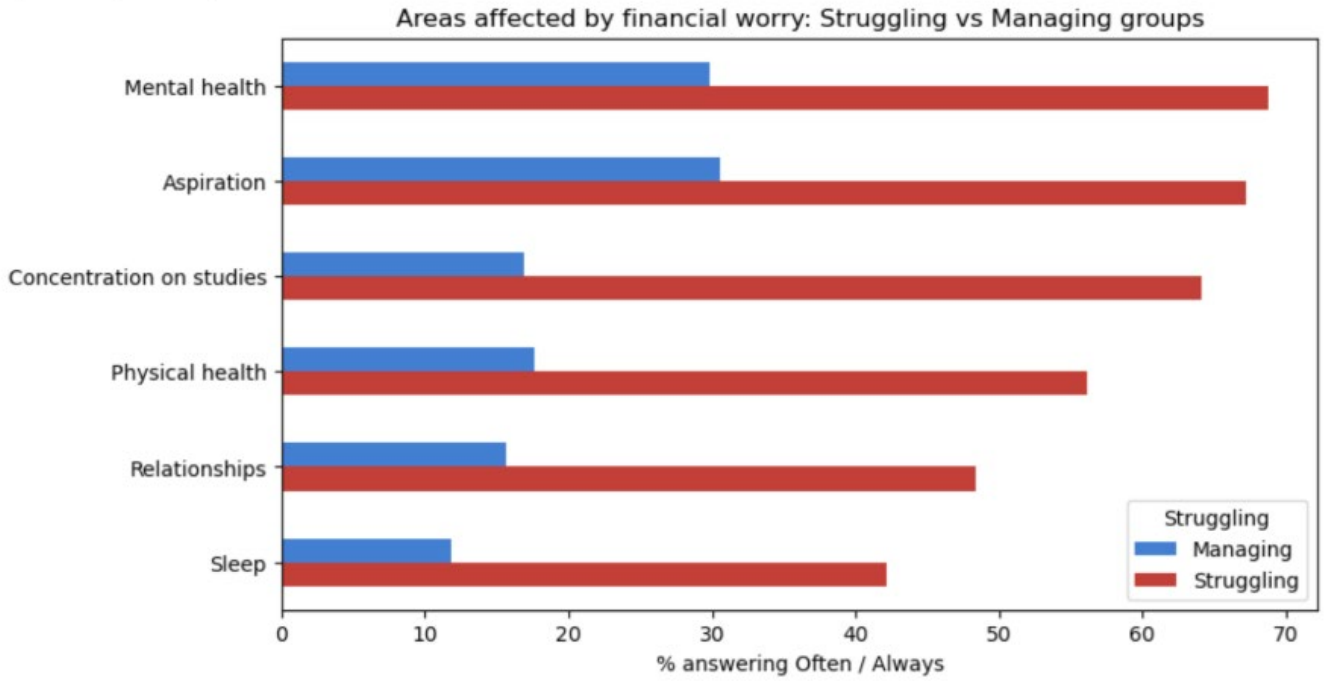


Figure X.X Areas affected by financial worry: Struggling vs Managing groups

However, with this breakdown we can more clearly see what financial hardship does to students' experience of their mental health, ability to concentrate, physical health, mental health, relationships, aspirations, and ability to sleep.

Over 60% of those who are struggling often or always suffer with mental health and their academic/career aspirations due to financial worry, whilst this figure hovers around 30% for those who are managing. That's a huge difference of 30pp.

WHAT SUPPORT SERVICES ARE OUR STUDENTS ACCESSING?

Of the students who filled out this survey, 30.4% of them said that they had not needed to access support services this academic year. Of those who accessed support, 26.6% had accessed the LSE counselling or wellbeing service, as well as 26.6% reporting they had accessed an NHS GP or mental health service.

Alarmingly for us, 20.3% of students said they had wanted to access support but felt that the process was too difficult or slow. 19.7% said they had wanted support but didn't know how to access it. Of the 63.3% of respondents who did not access support, the main barriers (from a pre-categorised list) they reported were:

- I didn't think my situation was serious enough (58.4% of subset)
- I didn't know what was available (41%)
- Waiting times were too long (22.8%)
- I felt embarrassed (20.8%)

Very few students from the overall sample had accessed the LSESU advice service or used the hardship or participation funds.

When later asked how well they felt LSESU communicates the financial support available to students, 44% felt 'Fairly well – I'm aware of some things but not everything', with 32% neutral as they've never looked for the support. 12% said 'Not well – I've had to search hard for information', with 8% reporting 'Poorly - I don't know what support exists'. Only 4% said 'Very well – I know exactly what's available and how to access it'.

Compared with their answers around support services, we can see that 52% of respondents do not feel that information around financial support is easily accessible. We really need to improve these pathways for students, which hopefully our automated Advice Service offering will help with this year.

WHAT STUDY-RELATED COSTS ARE STUDENTS FACING?

Aside from tuition fees, 26% of the sample spent upwards of £500 on study-related costs this academic year. Over a third spent between £1 - £200.

On the plus side, 52% of the respondents felt that the cost of study materials or activities did not impact their academic choices. Of those that the cost did effect, the leading impact was: "I feel if I had better materials/tech I would perform better academically" (21.6%). This was followed by "I have not been able to afford to purchase/replace personal tech necessary to my studies" (17.6%). It seems that avoiding choosing a module, project, or dissertation topic because of cost is not common, nor is using shared or outdated materials.

When it comes to Artificial Intelligence subscriptions, 61% of the sample were using Claude for Education or other free programmes. A small group of students pay for a subscription, and another smaller group would like a paid one but cannot afford it. Largely, it seems from this temperature check that financial gaps around AI have been resolved by the university's partnership with Anthropic.

WHAT PAID WORK ARE OUR STUDENTS UNDERTAKING ALONGSIDE STUDYING?

When asked if they were undertaking paid work alongside their studies, and if it was manageable for them, 30% of the sample said that they were working and also that the hours were manageable alongside studying. Comparatively, far less said that their work hours were negatively affecting their academic performance (6%).

The largest group, however, reported that they would like to work but can't find an opportunity to (33%).

WHAT COSTS ARE OUR STUDENTS FACING FROM TRANSPORT?

From our sample, 37% reported walking was their primary mode of transport to campus. This was followed by a neck-and-neck split of those who took the underground/overground/tram (24%) versus those who took the bus (23%).

39% of respondents' commute into campus took 26 – 40 minutes, with 25% taking 41-60 minutes, and 3% over that. 34% of respondents took less than 26 minutes to commute in.

52% of the sample had either a 16-25 railcard or 26-30 railcard. 23% of them had an 18+ oyster photocard. 25% didn't have any of these – a gap we should definitely look at tackling.

WHAT PROBLEMS ARE POSTGRADUATES FACING?

We had an overrepresentation of Postgraduate Taught students in this sample, at 7.1% above their proportion at school level. We asked Postgraduate Taught (PGT) and Postgraduate Research (PGR) students specifically about their postgraduate experience.

55.1% of the PGT and PGR respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed with the statement "Postgraduate-specific financial support is adequate at LSE (e.g. research allowance)". The rest were mostly neutral (39.5%), with only 5.4% agreeing. This shows that in this sample, postgraduate students overwhelmingly felt that financial support specific to their student type is inadequate.

49.2% of PGT/PGR students also felt they did not have enough postgraduate-specific spaces to study on campus. However, many of them were satisfied with their study spaces (28.3%) or neutral (22.5%).

37% of the Postgraduate respondents reported they were self-funded with no scholarship or stipend. 10% said that their stipend/funding does not cover their living costs.

When it comes to missing out, 17% of the Postgraduates said they had been unable to attend conferences or training they wanted to go to because of cost, and 10% have struggled with extra costs such as specialist software, printing, or fieldwork.

WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT US TO FOCUS ON TO TACKLE THE COST OF LIVING?

When asked what three things LSESU could focus on to help with the cost of living, and what matters to them most, the top three priorities were:

- Free or subsidised food provision (e.g. food bank, community kitchen) (47.6%)
- Subsidised travel (e.g. bus passes, cycle schemes) (43.6%)
- Negotiating cheaper accommodation with the university (42.9%)

From this list we see that food, travel, and housing interventions are most important to our students. Other popular answers included increasing the hardship fund (23.2%) and running more affordable social events and activities (22.6%).

WHAT'S THE DREAM?

It was important for us to think beyond just survival in this survey. We wanted to think about the unique ambitions and dreams our students have. We asked them if money was no object, what would they like to do/achieve during their time at LSE?

Here were the top 4 answers for the overall cohort:

- Travel with my friends (71.8%)
- Secure a dream graduate placement (63.3%)
- Write a first-class/distinction-worthy dissertation (59.6%)
- Learn new skills (53%)

Notably, other popular answers for our purposes (clubs, societies, events, etc.) included:

- Make the most of every networking opportunity (48.9%)
- Find my people (37%)
- Attend more events (35.7%)
- Get good (or stay good) at a sport (35.1%)

However, the vast majority of the respondents' dreams at LSE are centred around academic excellence and career ambitions.

When we divide by Undergraduate and Postgraduate, we can see there's a –10% gap between Postgraduates (both Taught and Research) (68.4%) to Undergraduates for the response 'Travel with my friends' (78.4%). This gap is also demonstrated with the responses 'Start and lead a club/society for something I love' (-15.4%) and 'Find my people' (-9.5%).

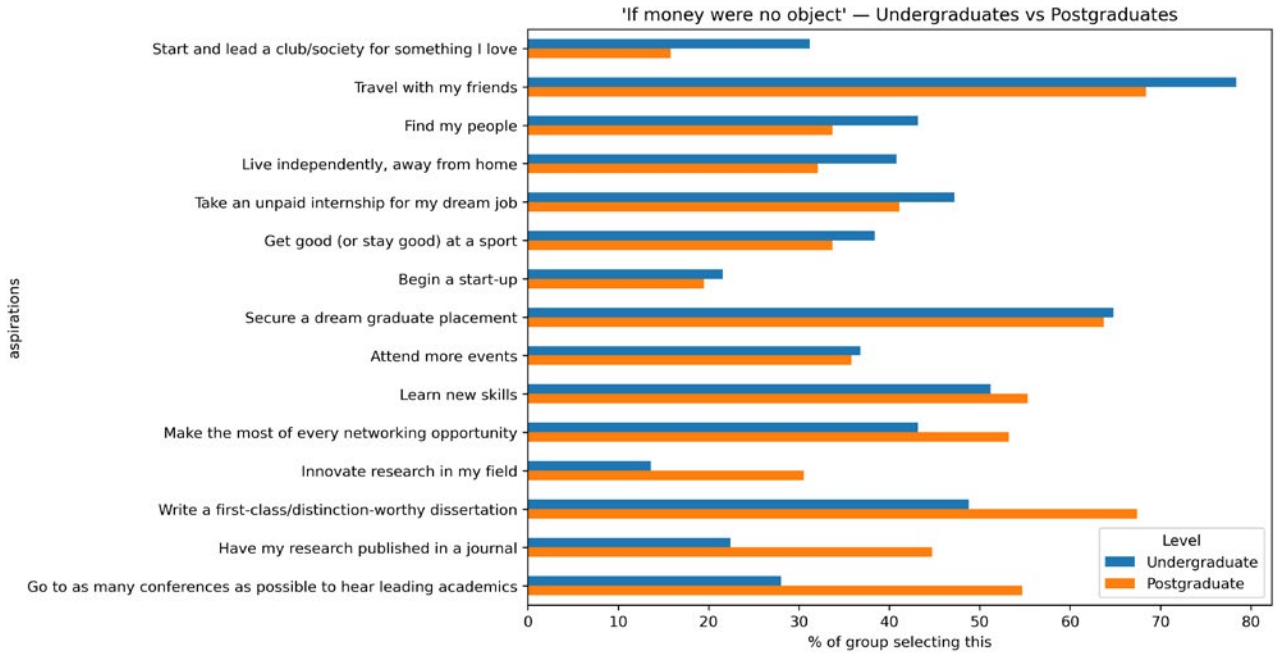


Figure X.X Undergraduate versus Postgraduate responses for 'If money were no object' question.

Undergraduates' priority list looks like:

- Travel with my friends (78.4%)
- Secure a dream graduate placement (64.8%)
- Learn new skills (51.2%)
- Write a first-class/distinction-worthy dissertation (48.8%)
- Take an unpaid internship for my dream job (47.2%)

Postgraduates show their priorities are a little different:

- Travel with my friends (68.4%)
- Write a first-class/distinction-worthy dissertation (67.4%)
- Secure a dream graduate placement (63.7%)
- Learn new skills (55.3%)
- Go to as many conferences as possible to hear leading academics (54.7%)

The gap from Undergraduates is most stark when talking about conferences (+26.7%), having their research published (+22.3%), and writing a first-class/ distinction-worthy dissertation (+18.6%).

From this comparison, we can see overall Undergraduate students lean slightly social whilst Postgraduates lean heavily academic. They both care about their future career, with the only variation in their top 5 being unpaid internships for Undergraduates versus conference attendance for Postgraduates.

The good news is that LSESU offers many opportunities to learn new skills, find their people, and more for a subsidised price.

CONCLUSION

The Cost of Living Survey 2026 paints a nuanced picture of student financial hardship during their time at LSE. While most students describe themselves as "Managing" rather than being in severe financial difficulty, financial pressures are nonetheless shaping student behaviour, wellbeing, academic experience, and engagement with university life. The findings suggest that the cost of living crisis is affecting students less through extreme deprivation and more through trade-offs that limit participation, wellbeing, and opportunity.

Who is most affected?

The clearest indicators of financial hardship from this sample are a student's a) student type (Undergraduate or Postgraduate) and b) dependent status (if they have dependents), rather than ethnicity, fee status, or accommodation type.

Postgraduate Taught (PGT) students reported significantly higher levels of financial difficulty than undergraduates. Around one quarter of PGT students reported either struggling financially or being in serious financial difficulty, compared with around 15% of undergraduates. Meanwhile, students with dependents emerged as one of the most financially vulnerable groups in the survey.

The survey found little evidence that hardship varies meaningfully by ethnicity or fee status. Home and Overseas students reported broadly similar overall financial situations, challenging some assumptions that fee status has a sizeable impact on a student's hardship.

The cost of living is changing student behaviour

Perhaps the strongest finding throughout the report is that most students are typically not experiencing the most severe manifestations of poverty, such as homelessness, utility deprivation, or falling behind on rent. Instead, they are making compromises elsewhere.

- The three most common behaviours linked to financial pressure were:
- Missing social events or activities they wanted to attend
- Borrowing money from family, friends, or credit
- Taking on paid work to cover basic costs

The social participation finding is particularly important for LSESU. Missing social opportunities was the single most common sacrifice students reported making, and struggling students were substantially more likely than managing students to forego activities and events because of cost. This suggests financial pressures are directly affecting students' ability to engage with the social, belonging, and community aspects of university life.

Food insecurity also emerged as an important concern. Amongst students who describe themselves as struggling financially, more than half reported often or always skipping meals, reducing meals, or being unable to afford balanced and nutritious food. These behaviours were rare among students who described themselves as financially managing.

Students with dependents are facing distinct challenges

Students with dependents consistently reported worse outcomes than those without dependents. Rather than simply working additional hours to increase income, these students appear more likely to reduce spending on essentials. Compared with students without dependents, they were substantially more likely to:

- Avoid purchasing course materials
- Avoid seeking medical or dental care
- Skip or reduce meals
- Be unable to afford nutritious meals

Interestingly, the gap in taking up paid work between students with and without dependents was relatively small. This suggests dependents may restrict students' capacity to increase earnings, forcing them instead to manage hardship by cutting consumption. Although the sample of students with dependents was relatively small, the findings indicate a potentially vulnerable group that warrants further attention.

Family support is critical

Most students are relying on resources beyond their primary student funding.

- The most common sources of supplementary income were:
- Family support (67%)
- Personal savings (57%)
- Part-time work during term time (41%)

This indicates that many students are not relying solely on loans, scholarships, or institutional support. The degree of dependence on family resources raises some questions for us about equity, as we know students without access to family financial support may face greater challenges navigating university and accessing opportunities.

Unexpected costs are a signficant issue

We can see almost 60% of respondents reported facing an unexpected one-off expense during the academic year.

- The most common unexpected costs were:
- Laptop/phone replacement
- Travel/transport emergencies
- Accommodation-related costs
- Healthcare expenses
- Clothing expenses for interviews or placements

Technology replacement stood out as particularly burdensome for respondents. Unlike some other costs, such as field trips or printing, students frequently reported laptop and phone replacement costs as creating an unexpected financial burden for them. These findings highlight how a relatively ordinary unexpected expense can significantly disrupt a student's finances.

International students face unique financial pressures

While international students were not markedly more likely to describe themselves as struggling overall, they reported several distinct financial challenges.

- The biggest pressures were:
- Currency exchange rate fluctuations
- Travel costs between the UK and home country
- Immigration Health Surcharge (IHS) costs
- Visa fees
- Upfront housing and settlement costs

Encouragingly, most international respondents had not considered leaving their course or the UK due to financial pressures. Nevertheless, a notable minority - around one in five - reported concerns about their ability to continue studying because of financial constraints. This remains a significant risk group.

Financial worry affects wellbeing and aspiration

One of the most important findings is the connection between financial pressure and student wellbeing.

The areas most commonly affected by financial worry were:

- Career and academic aspirations
- Mental health
- Ability to concentrate on studies

Among students who were struggling financially, over 60% reported that financial worry frequently affected their mental health and aspirations. The gap between struggling and managing students was approximately 30 percentage points across several wellbeing measures.

This suggests that financial hardship is not just about material deprivation. It is also affecting confidence, ambition, academic focus, and overall student experience. At an institution where

Students struggle to access support

A substantial proportion of respondents reported barriers to accessing support services across the SU and the School.

Key findings included:

- Over 20% wanted support but felt processes were too difficult or slow
- Around 20% wanted support but did not know how to access it
- Many students felt their situation was not serious enough to justify seeking help
- Awareness of available support was limited

Only a very small proportion of students felt they knew exactly what support existed and how to access it. Overall, the findings suggest that communication and accessibility may be bigger challenges than the absence of support itself.

Cost of study is generally manageable, but technology matters

Most students reported that study-related costs had not significantly altered their academic choices, which was positive. However, affordability of technology remained a recurring theme.

- Students were more likely to say that:
- Better technology would improve their academic performance
- They had been unable to replace necessary devices

By contrast, relatively few students reported changing modules, projects, or dissertation plans because of costs.

Employment and opportunity gaps

The survey does not suggest widespread overwork among students. Only a small proportion said paid work was harming their academic performance.

However, a large group of respondents reported wanting to work but being unable to find opportunities to. This points to an access problem rather than a workload problem.

What students want LSESU to prioritise

Students' top responses to what the SU should focus on when tackling the cost of living crisis were highly practical. The top priorities were:

- Free or subsidised food provision
- Subsidised travel support
- Cheaper accommodation

Students also expressed interest in expanded hardship funding and more affordable social activities.

Overall

The central finding here is that financial hardship at LSE is less about extreme poverty and more about restricted participation, reduced wellbeing, and constrained opportunity. Students are often coping by borrowing money, working more, skipping meals, and opting out of social experiences rather than falling behind on rent or going without utilities.

The most vulnerable groups appear to be Postgraduate Taught students and students with dependents. Across the wider student body, food affordability, transport costs, housing costs, and access to support emerge as the most important areas for intervention.

Perhaps most importantly for the SU, the survey suggests that financial pressures are preventing students from fully participating in university life. The cost of living crisis is not only affecting what students can afford, but also who they meet, what experiences they access, and how confidently they can pursue their academic and career ambitions.

LSE STUDENTS' UNION

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