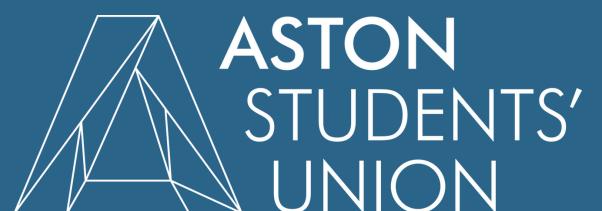


I CAN'T AFFORD TO STUDY SURVEY REPORT 2025 - 26

THE REAL COST OF STUDYING AT ASTON UNIVERSITY

**By Gagan Mopuri, President Wellbeing & Inclusion,
Welfare Committee of Aston Students' Union**



Cost of Living, Wellbeing and Student Experience Report

A Strategic Analysis of the
Student Survival Mechanism

Financial Pressure is Forcing 16% of Students to Consider Dropping Out.

While support services exist, an awareness gap creates a tragedy of underutilised resources during a cost-of-living crisis.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Retention Risk: Nearly 1 in 3 students (20%) indicate they may leave their course due to financial stress.



Wellbeing Impact: Financial pressure is the dominant stressor, rating 3.62/5 for negative impact on wellbeing.



The Support Paradox: 68% are aware support exists, but only 15% have utilised it. 22% of the students didn't know how to access the support services.



Critical Health Warning: 510 students report skipping meals to save money, directly impacting academic concentration.

The Cohort: A Diverse Community Facing Universal Pressure

N=1,078 Total Respondents. Data reflects a cross-section of the student body, including high-vulnerability groups.

Total Respondents:

1,078

Academic Breakdown

Postgraduate: 340
First-year undergraduates: 304
Second-year undergraduates: 216
Final-year undergraduates: 143
Placement-year students: 48



VULNERABILITY VECTORS

106



Neurodiverse
Students

38



Students with
Disabilities

26



Student Parents

4



Care Leavers

Note: 728 students did not identify with the listed categories, indicating widespread participation beyond specific equity groups.

Financial Anxiety is Now a Dominant Factor in Student Wellbeing

Quantifying the psychological and academic burden of the cost of living.

Impact on General Wellbeing



Impact on Academic Performance



Analysis: This is not a passive background issue; it is an active impediment to the university experience. The high wellbeing impact score suggests that money worries are a primary mental load for the majority of the cohort.

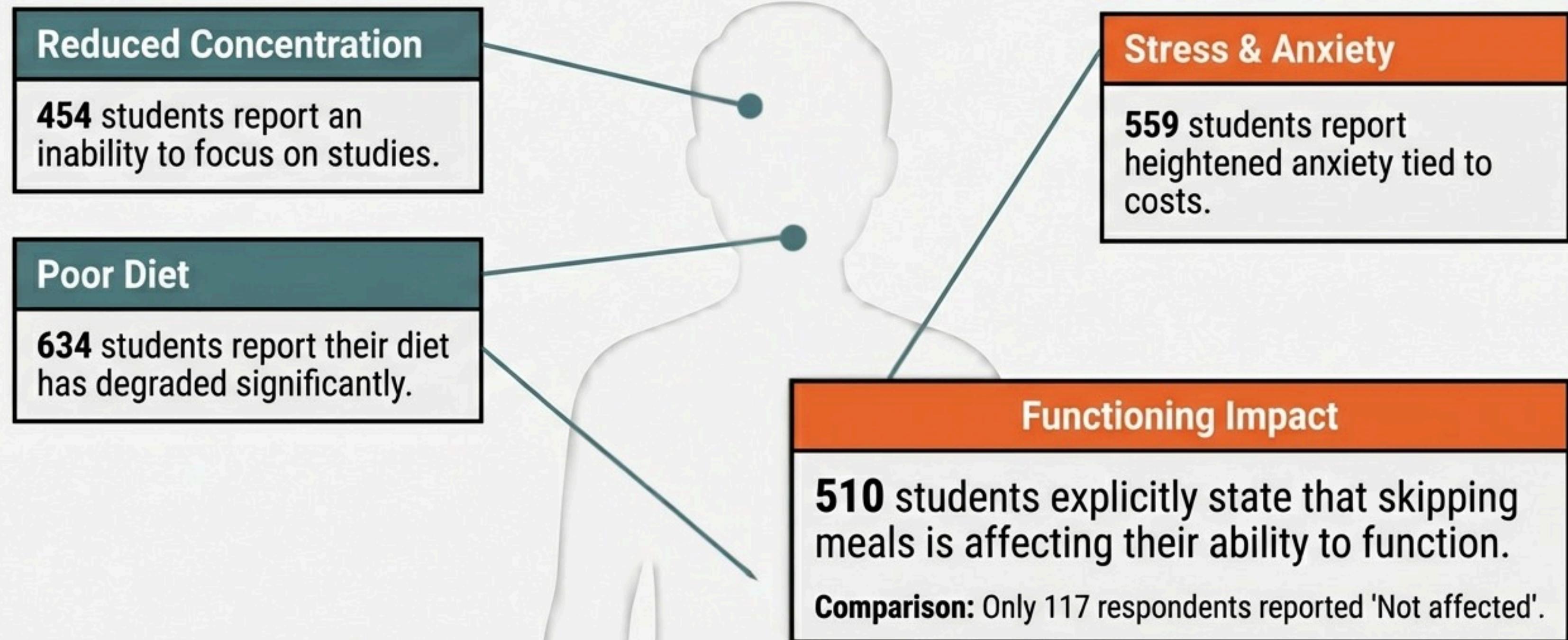
Nutrition is the First Sacrifice: Students are Trading Health for Saving Money

THE COPING HIERARCHY



Key Insight: More students are skipping meals (561) than are reducing portion sizes (350), indicating an 'all or nothing' approach to daily food intake when funds run low.

The Hidden Wellbeing Cost of Budgeting and Financial Survival



The Campus is Becoming a Luxury Many Cannot Afford to Visit

The Commute Burden

 Within 10 mins: 261

 20–40 mins: 269

 Commuters / Outside Birmingham: 241

The Cost of Attendance (Coping Mechanisms)

A. Transport Adjustments

 Walking more to save fare: 643

 Choosing cheaper transport options: 488

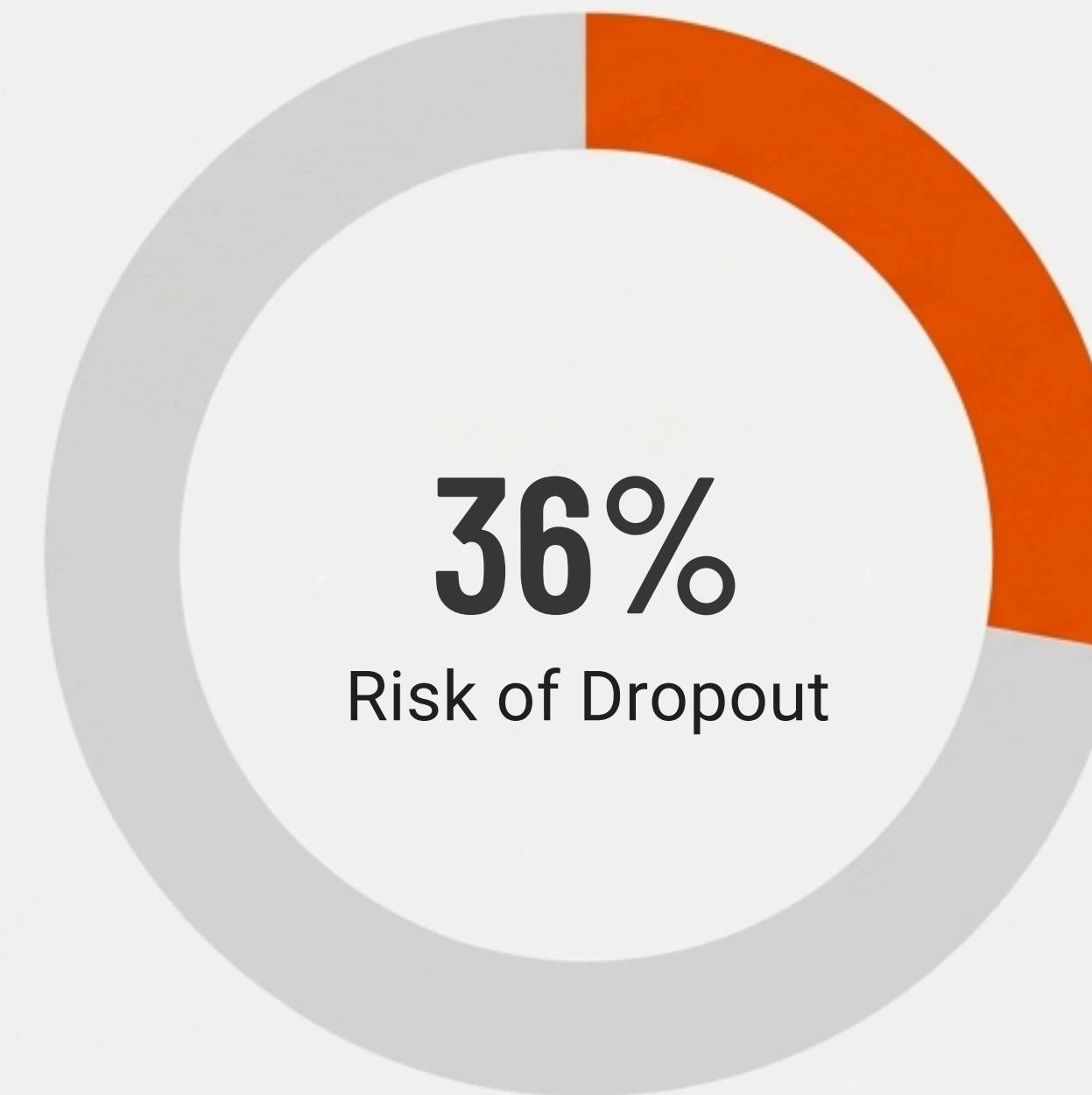
B. Detachment Behaviors

 Reducing campus visits: 318

 Skipping events or classes: 294

→ Insight: 318 students are actively choosing to stay away from the university environment to preserve cash reserves, leading to academic & student experience detachment.

The Retention Cliff: Financial Stress is Driving Dropout Ideation



Nearly 1 in 3 students have considered leaving their course (Yes/Maybe) specifically due to financial pressures.

Contributing Factors

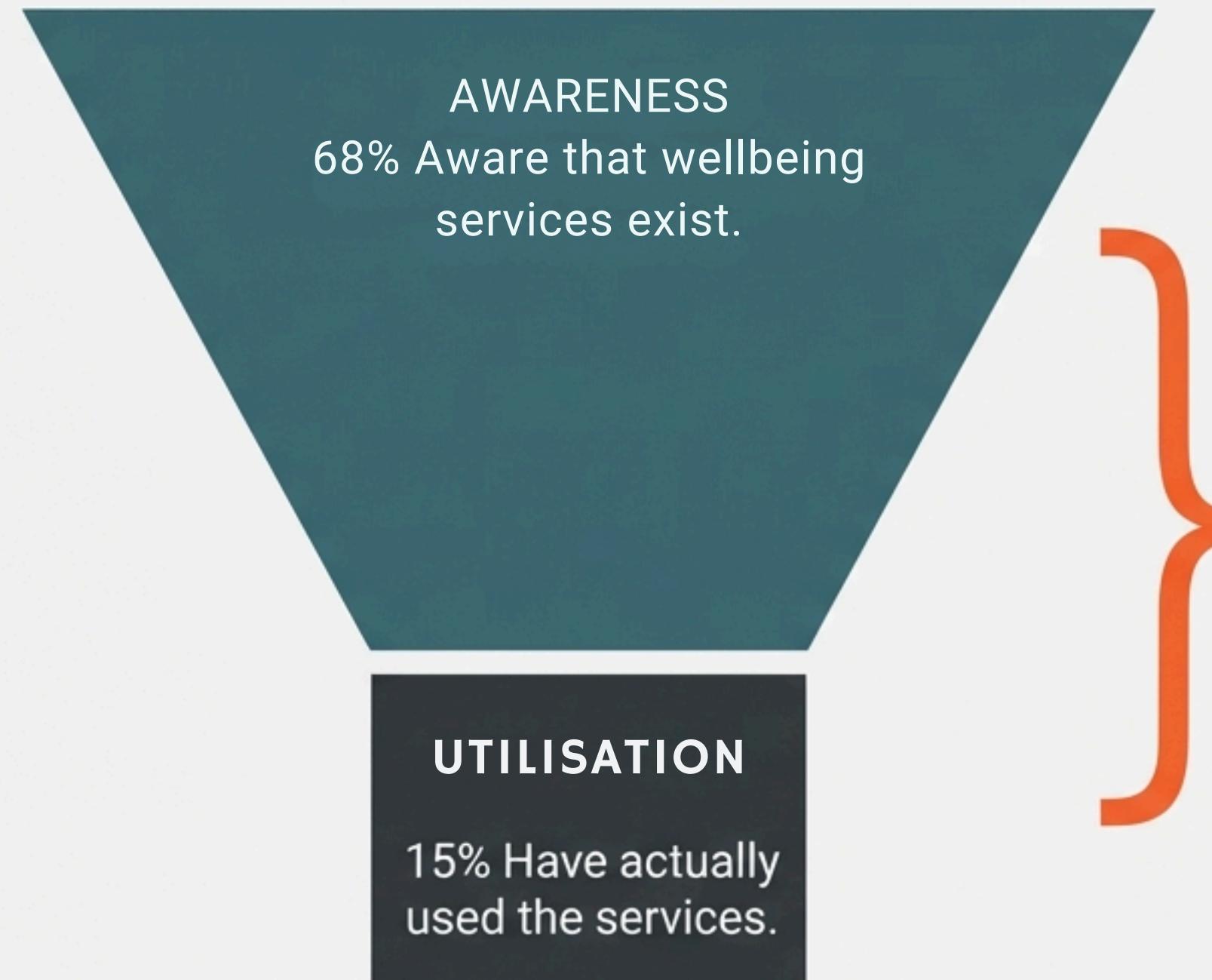


Higher Wellbeing Impact



Attendance Impact: 318 students are reducing their physical presence.

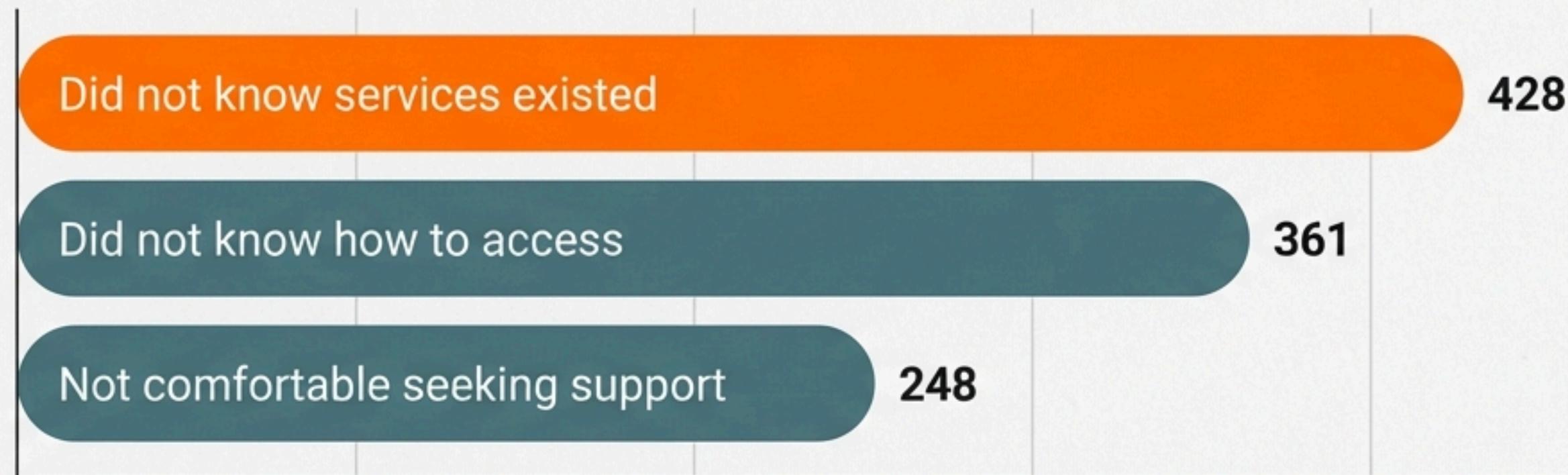
The Support Paradox: High Awareness, Low Utilization



Insight: There is a disconnect between "knowing help exists" and "knowing what help is available."

Barriers to Entry: The Problem is Communication, Not Just Stigma

Primary Barriers to Accessing Support



Perception
Scorecard

**Average
feeling of being
supported:
3.15 / 5**

Logistics (ignorance of service/process) outweigh psychological barriers (stigma). The primary reason students are hungry and unsupported is that 428 of them simply didn't know the support was there.

Student Voices: Perceptions of the Students' Union (SU)



Tangible Expressions of Care



The Intermediary Advocate

Students expect the SU to represent their interests regarding food, travel, and housing.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF SUPPORT

(What Works)



Student-Focused Approachability

Successful interactions lead to positive views of the SU as a dedicated ally.

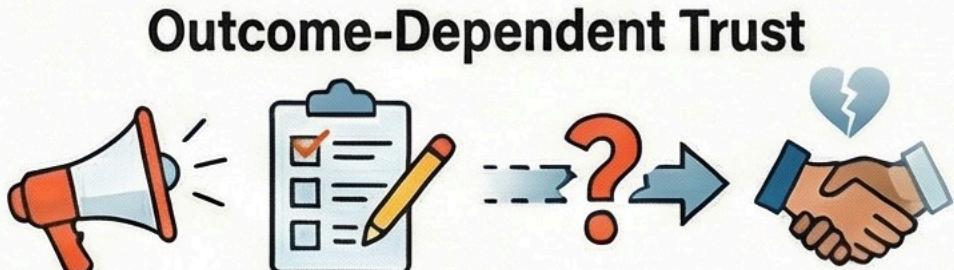


Awareness and Follow-up Gaps

Limited awareness and lack of follow-up on support requests create significant disengagement.

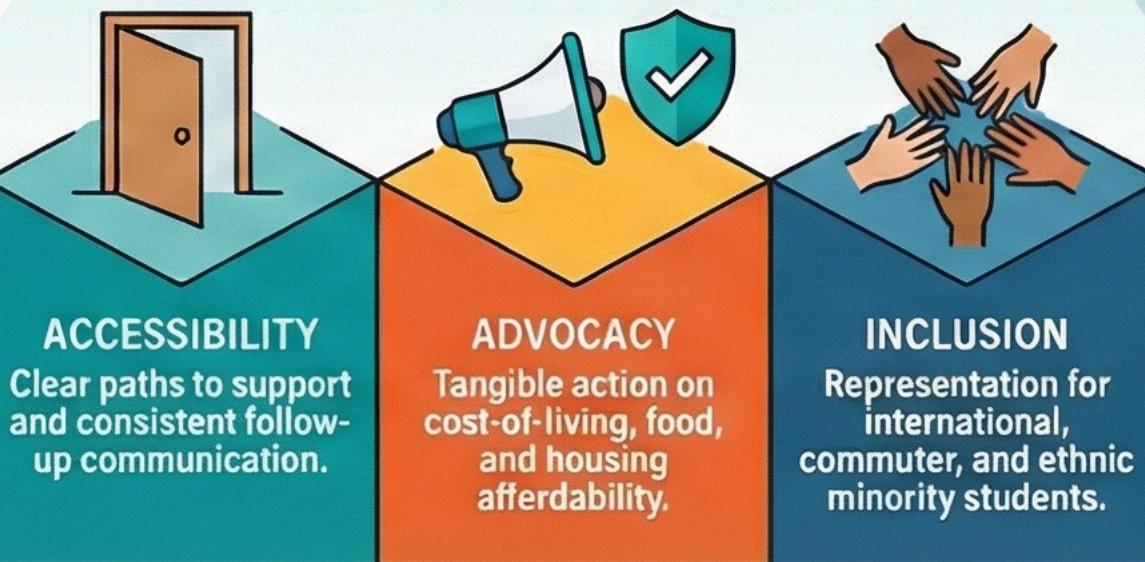
BARRIERS TO TRUST & INCLUSION

(What Needs Improvement)



Trust weakens when campaign outcomes and survey results are not clearly communicated.

CORE PILLARS OF EVALUATION



Inclusion & Belonging Hurdles
Minority, international and commuter students often feel excluded from traditional social spaces.

The Real Cost of Learning: How Financial Pressure Shapes the Student Experience

Physical and Financial Barriers



Normalised Food Insecurity

Students report skipping meals or eating poor nutrition as a routine, daily experience.



Transport as a Barrier to Learning

High travel costs lead to missed lectures and safety concerns during late-night commutes.



Hidden Accommodation Pressures

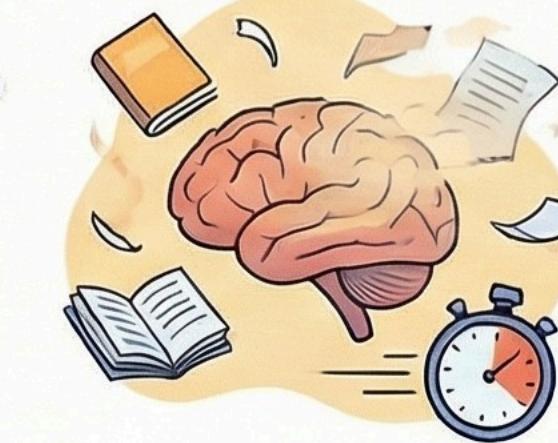
Beyond rent, costs like laundry and utilities force students further from campus.

Wellbeing and Academic Consequences



The Mental Health Toll

Financial stress triggers a reinforcing cycle of anxiety, emotional exhaustion, and low mood.



Eroded Academic Focus

Physical fatigue and financial anxiety directly reduce concentration and overall learning capacity.



Structural Employment Gaps

Students struggle to find work compatible with academics, especially those with visa restrictions.

Integrated Findings: Three Pillars of Institutional Risk

1. HEALTH CRISIS

Students are managing cost pressures by not eating

561 skipping meals; 634 poor diet.

Reduced cognitive function and physical health risks.

2. ACADEMIC PROGRESSION

Financial pressure is shaping engagement and retention.

36% considering dropout; 318 reducing campus visits.

Immediate threat to retention and student engagement.

3. THE COMMUNICATION CHALLENGE

Support services remain underused due to visibility barriers.

428 didn't know services existed; 56% unaware of free breakfast/other essential services

Students continue to struggle while resources go unused or misdirected

Addressing the cost-of-living crisis is the single most immediate solution available to mitigate the student engagement and retention risk.

The Six-Point Strategic Framework

Consolidated Roadmap for Joint Action

1. Food Security

Embed wellbeing priorities within catering services to reduce food insecurity

2. Travel Support

Pilot short-term free/discounted travel schemes.

3. Housing Affordability

Pursue affordable on-campus housing & cheaper laundry

4. Single Pathway

Create one coordinated University-SU support route.

5. Shared Strategy

Embed a joint approach with clear communication.

6. Early Intervention

Strengthen early support & commit to regular check-ins.

THANK YOU

Gagan Mopuri, President Wellbeing and Inclusion
president.wellbeing@union.aston.ac.uk
Welfare Committee, Aston Students' Union

