

I CAN'T AFFORD TO STUDY

Survey Report 2025–26

Prepared for: Aston University and Aston Students' Union
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Executive summary

- Total responses: 1,078 students (majority Birmingham campus).
- Financial pressure is widespread across levels of study, with strong representation from both undergraduate and postgraduate students.
- Financial stress is materially impacting student wellbeing (average 3.62/5; 56.8% rated impact 4–5) and academic performance (average 3.22/5; 40.5% rated impact 4–5).
- 16.1% of respondents said they have considered leaving their course due to financial pressures (Yes), with a further 19.7% selecting Maybe.
- Students are actively rationing essentials: the most common food coping strategies include buying cheaper alternatives, skipping meals, and shopping at discount supermarkets.
- Awareness exists for University wellbeing services, but conversion to use is low; awareness of SU Free Breakfast/Wellbeing Packages is also limited.

This report summarises key findings and sets out short-term (this academic year) and medium-term (strategic) focus areas for joint University–SU action.

Methodology (summary)

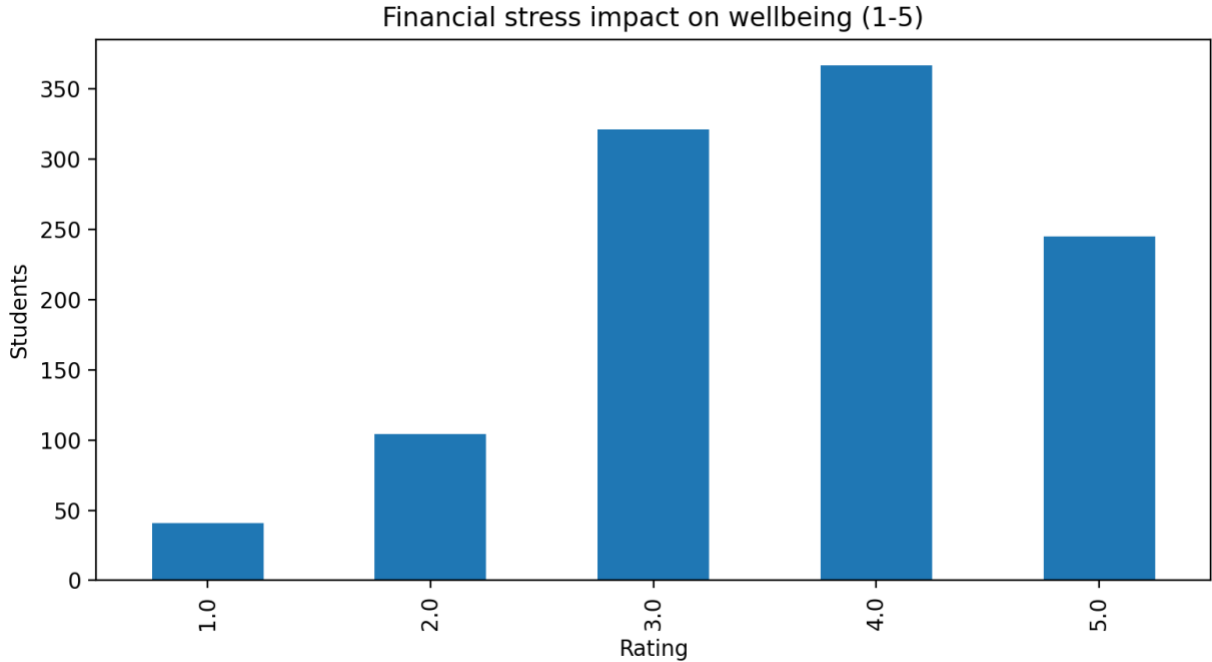
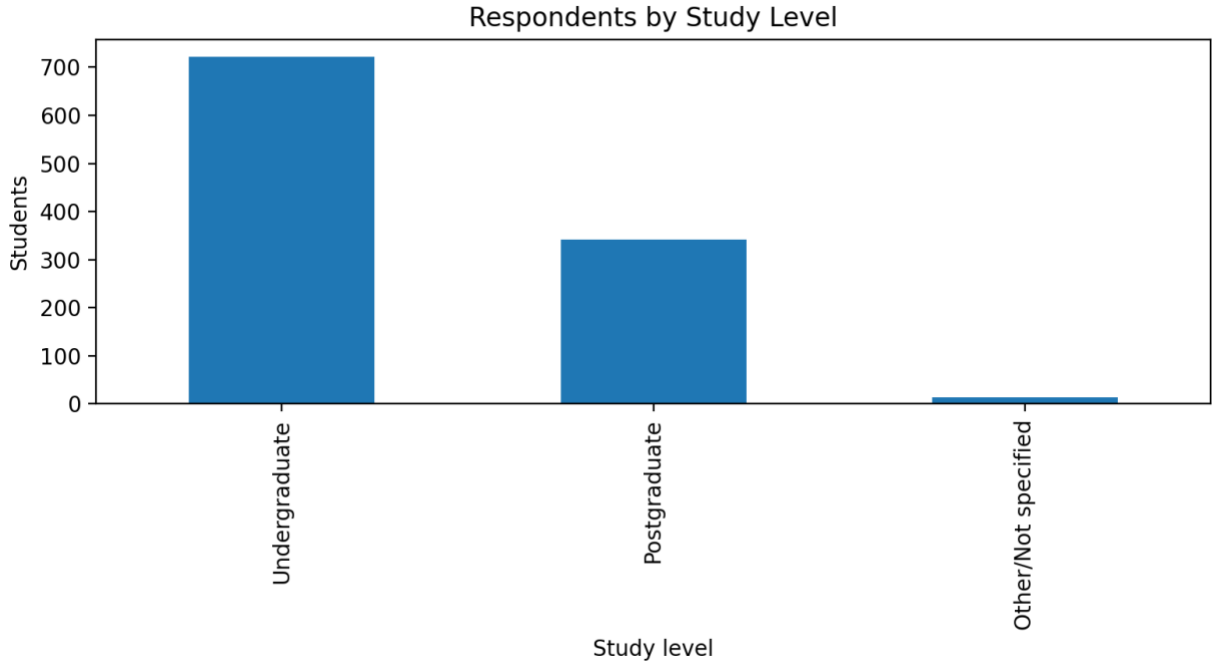
Student-led survey capturing experiences of financial pressure and cost-of-living impacts on food, accommodation, travel, wellbeing, and study. Responses were collected via an online questionnaire and analysed descriptively (counts and percentages).

Respondent profile

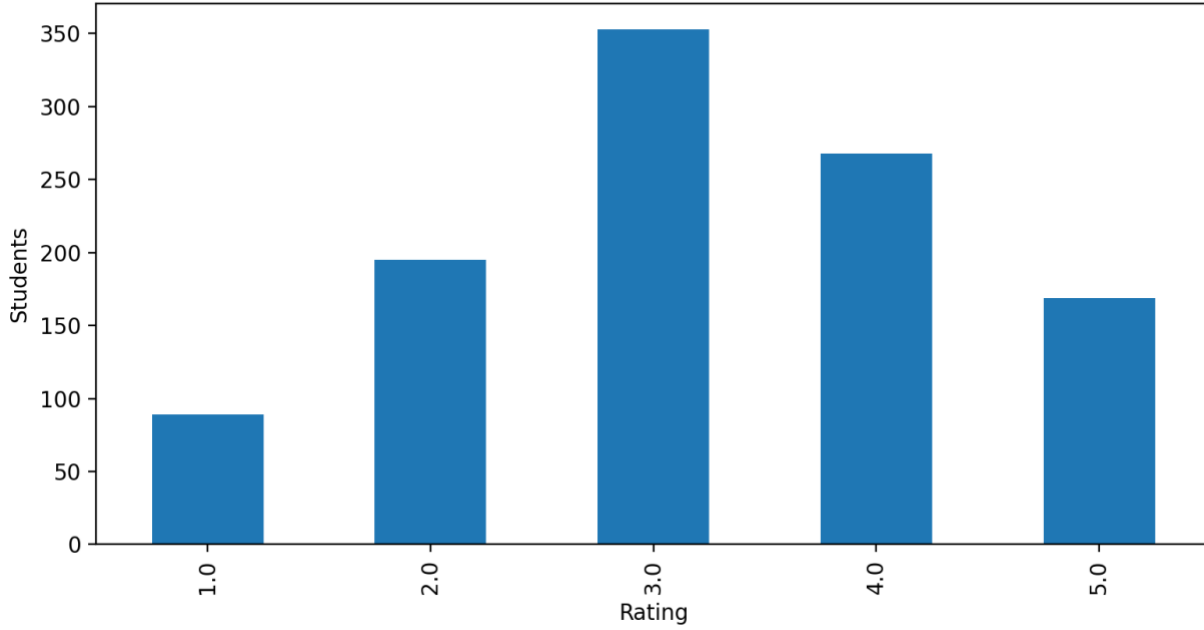
Profile metric	Count	Percent
Campus: Aston University - Birmingham	1,049	97.3%
Campus: Aston University - London	18	1.7%
Campus: Aston Online	11	1.0%
Study level: Undergraduate	722	67.0%
Study level: Postgraduate	342	31.7%
Study level: Other/Not specified	14	1.3%
Living situation: With parents / family	445	41.3%
Living situation: Student accommodation	347	32.2%
Living situation: Private rental	182	16.9%

Living situation: Other	103	9.6%
Living situation: Unknown	1	0.1%

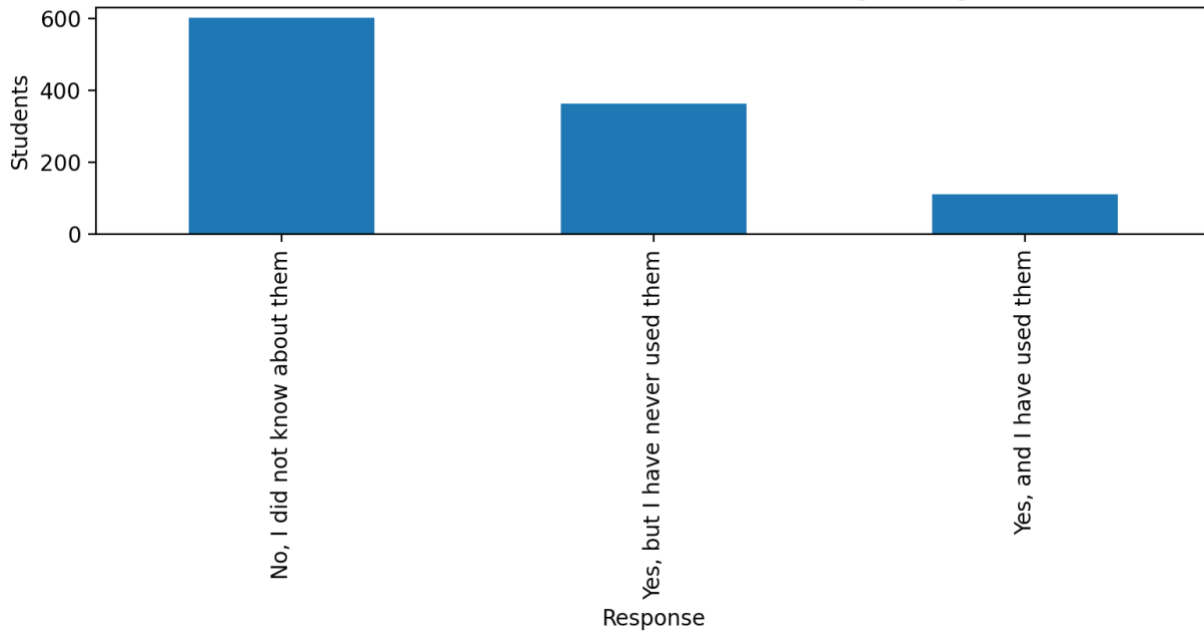
Key charts (overview)



Financial stress impact on academic performance (1-5)



Awareness of SU Free Breakfast / Wellbeing Packages



Key findings

1) Food affordability and food insecurity indicators

Weekly food spend bands: most respondents report spending £16–£30 (36.0%) or £31–£45 (25.9%) per week.

- Most common coping strategies (multi-select): buying cheaper alternatives (67.3%), skipping meals (52.0%), discount supermarkets (51.7%), and meal prepping (38.6%).
- Food costs are affecting students' wellbeing and study: poor diet/limited meals (58.8%), stress/anxiety (51.9%), skipping meals (47.3%), and reduced concentration (42.1%).
- Top supports requested (multi-select): food vouchers (73.7%), cheaper campus food options (56.9%), and subsidised on-campus meals (39.8%).

2) Accommodation costs and commuter pressure

Living situation (cleaned categories): 41.3% live with parents/family, 32.2% in student accommodation, and 16.9% in private rental.

- Accommodation cost bands: 20.1% pay £601–£800/month and 6.8% pay over £800/month (including bills).
- Accommodation impacts (multi-select): financial strain affecting daily life (47.2%), high stress/anxiety (42.4%), and making it harder to focus/study (33.7%).
- Distance from campus: 22.4% identify as outside Birmingham/commuter students; 25.0% are 20–40 minutes away; 13.8% are over 40 minutes away.
- Top supports requested (multi-select): more affordable university accommodation (41.2%), increased hardship funds (35.3%), emergency financial grants (35.2%), and rent subsidy/rent freeze measures (32.3%).

3) Travel costs

Weekly travel spend: 28.0% spend £11–£20, 26.1% spend £21–£30, and 11.5% spend £51+ per week.

- Top supports requested (multi-select): short-term free travel pass (83.3%) and discounted travel tickets (74.6%).
- Additional enablers: more online learning options (14.4%) and budgeting support (14.1%).

4) Wellbeing, academic impact, and continuation risk

- Wellbeing impact: average 3.62/5; 56.8% rated impact 4–5.
- Academic impact: average 3.22/5; 40.5% rated impact 4–5.
- Continuation risk: 16.1% answered Yes to considering leaving their course due to financial pressures, and 19.7% answered Maybe.
- Mental health support perception: average 3.15/5; 22.1% rated support low (1–2).

5) Awareness and access to support

- University wellbeing services: 68.5% are aware but have not used; 15.0% have used; 16.5% are not aware.
- SU Free Breakfast/Wellbeing Packages: 55.8% did not know about them; 33.8% knew but never used; 10.4% have used.
- Key barriers to accessing support (multi-select): not knowing services existed, not knowing how to access them, and discomfort seeking support.

Priority focus areas and recommended outcomes

Short-term focus (this academic year)

- Food security: expand low-barrier support (vouchers, subsidised meals) and improve affordability of campus food.
- Travel support: pilot a short-term free travel pass and negotiate discounted travel tickets; prioritise commuter students.
- Accommodation support: strengthen emergency grants and hardship funding routes; improve clarity on eligibility and turnaround times.
- Support awareness and navigation: simplify how students find help (one page, one link, consistent messaging), and increase promotion of SU offers.
- Early warning and escalation: introduce a clear pathway for students at risk of withdrawal due to financial pressure.

Medium-term focus (strategic)

- Institutional cost-aware practice: review hidden academic costs (printing, specialist equipment, placement travel) and publish transparent cost expectations by course.
- Affordable campus ecosystem: long-term campus food affordability plan and sustained food support provision (beyond short campaigns).
- Accommodation affordability: explore partnerships/controls to stabilise student rent, plus targeted support for those facing high housing costs.
- Commuter student strategy: align timetabling, blended learning, and travel support to reduce avoidable travel burden.
- Data-led monitoring: repeat pulse checks each term and track changes in key indicators (wellbeing, academic impact, continuation risk).

Recommended outcomes (how success will be measured)

- Reduced proportion of students reporting severe wellbeing impact (4–5) due to financial stress.
- Improved awareness and uptake of SU Free Breakfast/Wellbeing Packages and University wellbeing support services.
- Improved student-reported ability to meet basic needs (food and travel) during term time.
- Reduced proportion of students considering course withdrawal due to financial pressures.
- Clearer, faster routes to emergency support (grants and hardship) with transparent communication.

Implications for the University (Recommended Actions)

- Strengthen food affordability on campus through subsidised meals and pricing review, aligned to student wellbeing and continuation objectives.
- Support commuter students by exploring short-term travel support options and timetable flexibility, particularly for those travelling from outside Birmingham.
- Improve clarity and turnaround of emergency financial support, ensuring students understand eligibility and access routes.
- Embed cost-aware academic practice by reviewing hidden course-related costs and publishing transparent cost expectations.
- Monitor impact through termly pulse checks linked to wellbeing, engagement, and continuation indicators.

Implications for Aston Students' Union (Delivery Focus)

- Prioritise awareness and navigation of support services, addressing the gap between awareness and uptake.
- Scale food support initiatives such as free breakfasts and explore voucher or partnership-based provision.
- Target commuter students through tailored campaigns, advocacy, and flexible engagement approaches.
- Use survey evidence to inform funding bids, partnerships, and University negotiations.
- Track engagement and outcomes to strengthen trustee reporting and future campaigning.

Conclusion

The findings from the I Can't Afford to Study survey demonstrate that cost-of-living pressures are having a tangible impact on student wellbeing, academic engagement, and continuation risk. By taking forward the recommended actions outlined above, Aston University and Aston Students' Union have an opportunity to work collaboratively to reduce avoidable financial stress, support student success, and evidence a shared commitment to an inclusive and supportive student experience.