

# The Cost of Living Crisis: what universities are doing to support students

Latest update: January 2023

The cost of living crisis is causing a raft of problems for students at universities. We know the student community is deeply concerned, as are university leaders. This briefing updates one shared in a version issued last September, to take in account of changes that have occurred over the past four months.

Universities are working, individually and collectively, at national level, to increase the range of support they can offer. We need the Scottish Government, UK Government and other stakeholders to support us in this.

Polling undertaken in September by Savanta ComRes on behalf of Universities UK shows:

- Two-thirds (67%) of students in higher education feel concerned about managing their living costs.
- Those aged 30 years or over are the most concerned (85% concerned).
- Of those who feel concerned, more than 8 in 10 (85%) are feeling more concerned about their living costs than last year.<sup>1</sup>

More recently, England-only data from ONS<sup>2</sup> published in November found that:

- 9 in 10 students reported that their cost of living had increased compared with last year (which is consistent with the rest of the population).
- Students were asked how worried or unworried they had been about the rising cost of living in the previous fortnight: 49% said “very worried” with a further 42% saying they were “somewhat worried”.
- In comparison, 25% of the general public, and 25% of the general public aged 16 to 29 year olds said they were “very worried”.
- The consequence of that is that over 60% of students are spending less on food shopping and essentials with four in ten using less fuel.
- 25% of students surveyed are using credit more than usual. Credit cards, buy now pay later, loans or overdrafts are being utilised to purchase essentials.

## **Support available to students in every university**

- **Accommodation costs are inflation-proofed.** University-owned student accommodation contracts are price-locked for 2022-23, inclusive of utility costs, which means students won't face rising energy prices as part of their contracts this academic year.
- **Discretionary funding.** All our members offer financial support in the form of their discretionary funding. Discretionary funding is not a loan and does not need to be paid back. This is available to

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<sup>1</sup> <https://comresglobal.com/polls/universities-uk-students-cost-of-living/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ons.gov.uk/releases/costoflivingandhighereducationstudentsengland24octoberto7november2022>



students following an assessment of need, in addition to any loans or bursaries. This includes not just Scottish domiciled students but rest of the UK and international students too.

- The process needed to access discretionary funding has been streamlined so students can access emergency funding quickly. Some universities have increased staffing numbers able to assist with claims, in anticipation of the coming year and to reduce the turnaround time for applications being processed.
- **Focused communication.** All our members have updated their websites to students and prospective students with the most recent costs of living to be transparent about the cost of university this year.
- **Mental health support.** Given the well-established link between finances and mental health, all of our members offer mental health and wellbeing advice, advisors and counselling to students.
- **Partnership.** Universities are working in collaboration with their students' associations to ensure the support is appropriate, accessible and tailored to the needs of students.
- **Sign-posting to other savings.** Universities are pointing students towards other sources of savings, including active promotion of the Young Persons' (Under 22s) Free Bus Travel to eligible students.
- **Addressing digital poverty.** Universities are investing in measures that address digital poverty, with support of £1.6m from the Scottish Funding Council as well as their own funds. This includes but is not limited to: devices such as laptops and tablets; hardware such as keyboard, mouse or headset; connectivity equipment such as Wi-Fi and Mi-Fi dongles.

#### **Collective action, taken as a sector**

Universities Scotland co-hosted a student poverty roundtable with NUS Scotland in October 2022, where there was agreement that the following actions should happen:

- A strategic approach to diverse accommodation options to meet diverse student needs;
- An uplift in the level of resource for discretionary funding for students;
- Ensuring that international students are able to secure SAAS discretionary funding on the same basis as other students;
- An uplift in the basic student finance package;
- A clearer understanding of an appropriate income level for students;
- Ensuring that information about the cost-of-living is timely for prospective students;;
- Targeted messaging to students on sources of funding availability;
- Recognition of the risk and act now to prevent the potential exploitation of international students in jobs market;
- Implementation of warm banks across campuses;
- Action to reduce the day-to-day cost of being a student;
- Closer connections to wider Scottish Government support initiatives; and
- Research into 'what works' for the diverse nature of the student population.

#### **Further support available from individual institutions**

In addition to the package of student support available at every institution, universities have and will continue to take a range of activities and actions to support students. Examples of different activities across the sector include:



### Addressing the cost of study

- The University of Glasgow, University of St Andrews and SRUC have ensured that all recommended textbooks are available free in the form of e-books from the library.
- The University of Stirling and SRUC have removed a requirement for assignments to be submitted on paper, reducing print costs for students.
- Abertay University will keep their library open over the Christmas period where students have a warm place to study. There will also be a supply of free food items for students.
- The University of Aberdeen have abolished all fines at their library with immediate effect from 8 December 2022.

### Addressing food poverty

- University of the West of Scotland, Edinburgh Napier University, Glasgow Caledonian University, University of Dundee, SRUC and UHI Inverness have established free breakfasts on campuses. In addition, at both Dundee and UHI Inverness there is a community larder.
- The University of Edinburgh has fixed food prices at cafes and outlets from August 2022 including the addition of a £1.50 lunch menu. Any further food inflation will be covered by the University. The Glasgow School of Art has appointed a new catering supplier to provide low cost hot meals.
- University of Edinburgh, Heriot-Watt and Robert Gordon University are all running cooking sessions for students. For new students, away from home for the first time, knowing how to cook inexpensive meals will help students to manage budgets and avoid reliance on high-cost take-aways.
- Robert Gordon University and the Universities of Edinburgh and Glasgow, have all made hot water stations and microwaves available to students who wish to bring (and re-heat) their own food to campus rather buy food on site.
- UHI Inverness has established a 'breakfast club'. It also has a 'cubby' which offers warm clothes and toiletries and will shortly have a community larder. A similar pantry has been established at the University of Dundee.
- Royal Conservatoire of Scotland provided grocery packs of essential items of food over the holiday period for students who were unable to return home for Christmas.
- Queen Margaret University has emergency food vouchers available in student accommodation and on campus for any student in crisis. The Glasgow School of Art has introduced supermarket vouchers, available without application to students in crisis.
- The University of Aberdeen have developed a hardship support of meal kits and vouchers, accessible 24/7, through lockable cabinets in various campus locations.

### Addressing fuel poverty

- The universities of Stirling, Edinburgh and Aberdeen have 'warm spaces' available on campus where students will be able to spend time in a heated environment. In addition, University of Edinburgh and SRUC have ensured that hot showers on campus are available for students to use free of charge. At SRUC there are toiletries provided for those that need them.
- Heriot-Watt University, the University of Glasgow, Queen Margaret University, Robert Gordon University, University of Strathclyde are all increasing the number of self-study, social and



recreational spaces on campus and extending their opening hours so that students to reduce heating costs at home. The University of St Andrews is doing this too looking at ways in which members of the community can also be encouraged to use the space.

#### Addressing digital poverty

- MiFi units are available for free loans to students at many of our universities. These devices provide internet connection without students needing to purchase home-broadband. Devices are small and portable, enabling students to study where and when is convenient to them.
- The University of Dundee have purchased an additional 150 laptops this year for allocation to students whose circumstances threatened to disrupt their studies.
- Abertay University have introduced charging lockers where students can charge devices, such as phones, laptops and tablets for free.

#### Support for living costs (in addition to locked-in costs on accommodation)

- The University of Glasgow is offering subsidised nursery provision.
- Robert Gordon University and University of the West of Scotland offers free sports membership for all students.
- The University of St Andrews has worked with Stagecoach that sees students pay just 25% of the cost of their bus travel. The university has agreed to subsidise the remaining cost during a six-month pilot scheme.

#### Action we would like the Scottish Government to take

Universities are stepping up to do what they can to meet the cost-of-living pressures facing students. We also need Government to meet its responsibilities. This includes:

- **Enhance student support.** Scottish Government to ensure that the student support regime is fit for purpose to meet the increased financial pressures that students are experiencing, building on the recommendations of the Scottish Government's review of student support in [A New Social Contract for Students](#). This is especially critical for certain groups of learners such as part-time students. Rectifying this would be of huge benefit to all our members, but especially the Open University in Scotland.
- **Increase discretionary funding.** Universities provide discretionary funding for students in need via student support services. Our members receive some discretionary funding via the Student Awards Agency Scotland (SAAS). Discretionary funding for students in 2022/23 from SAAS is now down by 58% relative to 2020/21. SAAS discretionary funding was effectively doubled in 2020/21 to address the specific challenges facing students during the pandemic. However, this was very much a one-off. This year we have also seen considerable variation between allocations to our members. We would like to see this rectified.
- **Address accommodation costs by supporting the supply-side.** Housing is a major cost for students. Inflation and the current scarcity of suitable student accommodation is driving up costs. We want to see the Scottish Government take action that will stimulate the supply-side of the private rental and HMO market and ease this pressure facing students. By Spring 2023 (which fits with the same timescale as the Government's [review of purpose-built student accommodation](#)) the Scottish Government should urgently review its current private rental



and HMO regulations and identify adjustments, which would maintain protections for tenants whilst providing for a reconnection of the market with the academic cycle, thereby giving landlords confidence to (re)enter the student market. You can find out more about in our January 2023 briefing for MSPs on [student accommodation](#).

**ENDS**

