

CAMPAIGN TO INCREASE

THE SOCIAL WORK

STUDENT INCENTIVE SCHEME

THE CASE FOR CHANGE

MAY 2024



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Foreword

ORLAITH MCGIBBON, Chair of The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI)

Our student social work colleagues are the future of our profession. I never cease to be impressed by their dedication, commitment and passion as they train to support children, families and individuals overcome social problems and improve life opportunities.

Calling out the injustice of poverty and inequality across our society is central to the work of BASW NI. It is deeply troubling that so many of our student cohort are struggling financially as they undertake their training. This research demonstrates the severity of the impacts they face.

BASW NI is calling for an increase in the Student Incentive Scheme. Enhancing the financial support provided to student social workers will reduce the financial pressures they face—pressures which are impacting their mental wellbeing, quality of life, and ability to engage with their studies. It is particularly concerning that these impacts are greatest for students with caring responsibilities.

Diversity is strength and it is vital that people from all backgrounds are supported to study social work and join our profession. Adequately incentivising the social work degree is central to growing capacity within our understaffed social work system. It is also key to ensuring social workers begin their careers free from the damaging burdens associated with financial insecurity.

On behalf of BASW NI I thank the students who took part in this report and the academics who supported our research. The findings present compelling evidence in support of our call, made jointly with the Social Workers Union and social work students, for the Department of Health to increase the Student Incentive Scheme payment by a minimum of £3,000 per year.



Foreword

JOHN MCGOWAN, General Secretary, Social Workers Union (SWU)

At a time of recruitment concerns in social work, the Department of Health in Northern Ireland must act quickly to attract and retain social work practitioners and support the BASW NI / SWU campaign to increase the Social Work Student Incentive Scheme. The student payment has not been increased for over a decade and a half, despite inflated costs of living and the impact of austerity. This ought to be revised as a priority.

BASW and SWU have already supported Welsh students in their successful campaign to have the Welsh Government increase funding for student support by 50% and helped Scottish students win a review of finance for social work students. The time is right for an increase in funding for Northern Ireland students.

As part of this campaign, we've heard directly from students just how difficult their situations are now and elected Ministers must now listen to their testimony.

Students are having to work during full time placements, often in the evenings and weekends. If students have children, they are relying on friends and family for childcare so they can complete placements and then work. This means many are exhausted by the end of placement and students have spoken to me about the toll that this takes on their own families and relationships.

The recruitment, training, and retention of students is critical to ensuring the future of social work and therefore we rightly should be supporting those who want to join our profession, but as seen throughout this report, this can be extremely difficult.

I call on the Department of Health to reform funding and increase the Student Incentive Scheme payment for social work students. This will ensure that students are on their way to be funded adequately from the outset. Without reform we risk not having enough social workers in the future to meet the statutory roles they play, let alone enabling social workers to help strengthen social work teams in crumbling social work systems. SWU and BASW NI will continue to play a full role in ensuring that we address the concerns regarding social work student finance in Northern Ireland and ask for fairer system and an urgent increase of payments.

Social work is grounded on values of equality, diversity, inclusion, and holistic approaches. To ensure students are able to take the very best learning from their studies and to fully integrate themselves into experiences that can enhance their learning, they need to be provided adequate financial support to do this.



Executive Summary

Social work students in Northern Ireland are facing concerning financial pressures. All 302 students who participated in the survey explained their standard of living has been negatively impacted by the cost-of-living crisis. Three-quarters (73%) are unable to make ends meet or are struggling to do so.

Respondents who have caring responsibilities (55%) in addition to their social work studies are suffering even more acutely. More than three-quarters (78%) of respondents with caring responsibilities are cutting back on energy use, and two-thirds (65%) have resorted to using more credit or are going into debt.

The situation is so severe that almost a quarter (23%) are considering leaving their studies because of the financial pressures they are facing. Carers, older students and those who started their course in 2022 are most at risk of leaving.

The vast majority of respondents (93%) indicated the £500 received by students as part of the Student Incentive Scheme for travel costs associated with practice placements is not enough to cover the costs they incur.

Nearly six out of ten respondents (58%) state the travel cost allowance needs to increase by at least £500 per year. This would amount to a doubling of the allowance. Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents with caring responsibilities state the allowance needs to rise by this amount.

Nearly all respondents (98%) stated that the £4,000 annual payment is not sufficient to meet the costs associated with completing the Degree in Social Work.

More than half (55%) of respondents state the student incentive scheme should be increased by at least £3,000 per year. Almost half (45%) of respondents with caring responsibilities state it should increase by at least £4,000.

Background

The British Association of Social Workers (BASW), in partnership with the Social Workers Union (SWU), is campaigning across the UK to raise the level of bursaries for student social workers. Increasing the Student Incentive Scheme for social work students in Northern Ireland is a key priority for BASW NI.

The Association has partnered with the Ulster University (UU) Stand up for Social Work Society and Queen's University Belfast (QUB) Social Work Society in calling for an uplift in the financial assistance provided. Over recent months, BASW NI has engaged in discussions with student social workers at both QUB and UU concerning their experiences of receiving support under the Student Incentive Scheme.

Under the Student Incentive Scheme, eligible student social workers in Northern Ireland receive an annual payment of £4,000 and an allowance of £500 towards travel costs associated with practice placements. While it has not been possible to ascertain the date the scheme was introduced, BASW NI is aware the £4,000 annual payment has been in place unchanged since at least 2008.

The impact of inflation has significantly reduced the real terms value of the financial support provided. Had the annual payment kept track with inflation since 2008 it would be worth £6,280 in March 2024.

While financial support for student social workers has remained unchanged, student nurses and allied health professionals have seen increased support. This represents a lack of parity between student social workers and their healthcare colleagues.

Methodology

Social work students studying in Northern Ireland were invited to participate in an anonymous online survey hosted on the *Survey Monkey* platform. The questionnaire is available in the Appendix to this report.

The survey ran from 25 January to 19 February 2024 and was open to all social work students in QUB and UU on both the three-year undergraduate and two-year relevant graduate route courses. The survey link was disseminated by academic colleagues at QUB and UU and promoted via BASW's member e-bulletin.

The survey comprised 16 closed questions which collected quantitative data and there was provision in the questionnaire for respondents to provide additional qualitative responses to specific questions. Verbatim qualitative responses are included in the survey findings. Demographic data was also collected.

302 eligible responses from students attending QUB and UU were submitted and analysed.



Survey Findings

Standard of living and financial status

Respondents were asked if the increased cost of living has affected their standard of living during their time at university. Standard of living was defined as *the amount of money, comfort, material goods, and necessities that the respondent had available to them on a daily basis.*

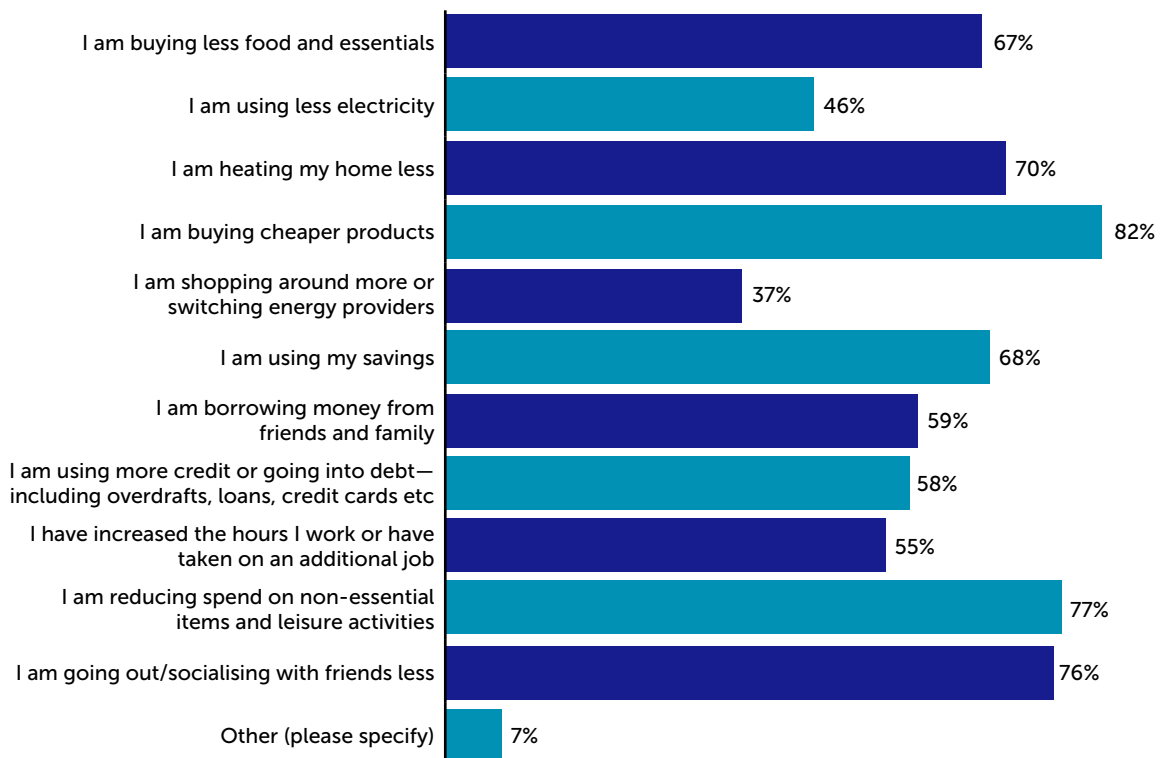
The entire cohort stated the increased cost of living has affected their standard of living.

When asked what steps they had taken in response to the increased cost of living, the most frequently cited responses were: buying cheaper products (82%), reducing spend on non-essential items and leisure activities (77%) going out/socialising with friends less (76%), heating their home less (70%) using savings (68%) and buying less food and essentials (67%).

Worryingly, nearly six out of ten respondents (59%) reported having borrowed money from friends or family and a similar proportion (58%) have resorted to using more credit or going into debt as a result of the increased cost of living.

Table 1

What steps have you taken as a result of the increased cost of living? (tick all that apply)



(Figures rounded to the nearest number)

Of particular concern is the situation for students with caring responsibilities who made up 55% of the total sample.

Of those with caring responsibilities, 40% are the parent or guardian of a child or children aged under 18 and 11% are the parent or guardian of a child or children aged under 18 with additional needs. 14% care for an adult or adults and 7% care for an adult or adults with additional needs.

Nearly eight out of ten respondents (78%) with caring responsibilities report they have been impacted negatively financially as a result of their caring responsibilities.

Among those with caring responsibilities for an adult, 78% say they are heating their home less and 52% are cutting back on electricity use. For those caring for young people the picture is similar, with 77% cutting back on heating.

Although direct impacts on dependents were not explored via the questionnaire, nonetheless these findings are particularly worrying given the potentially damaging effects that reductions in the use of electricity and colder homes could have on the wellbeing of the people being cared for. Research published by the House of Commons Library¹ explains that living in a cold home can worsen asthma and other respiratory illnesses and increase the risk of heart disease and cardiac events. It can also worsen musculoskeletal conditions such as arthritis.

The research also highlights cold or damp conditions can have a significant impact on mental health, with depression and anxiety more common among people living in these conditions.

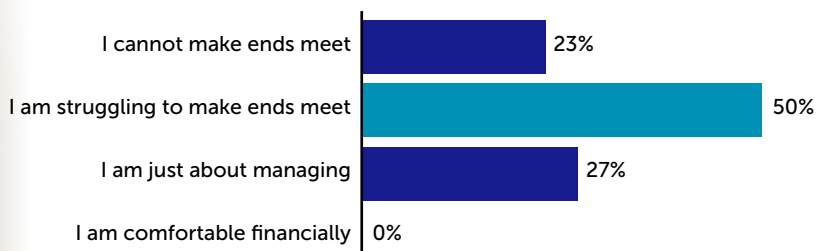
When asked to describe their current financial situation, 23% of respondents explained they cannot make ends meet. Half indicated they are struggling to make ends meet and 27% said they were just about managing.

No respondents described their situation as financially comfortable.



Table 2

Which statement best reflects your current financial situation?



(Figures rounded to the nearest number)

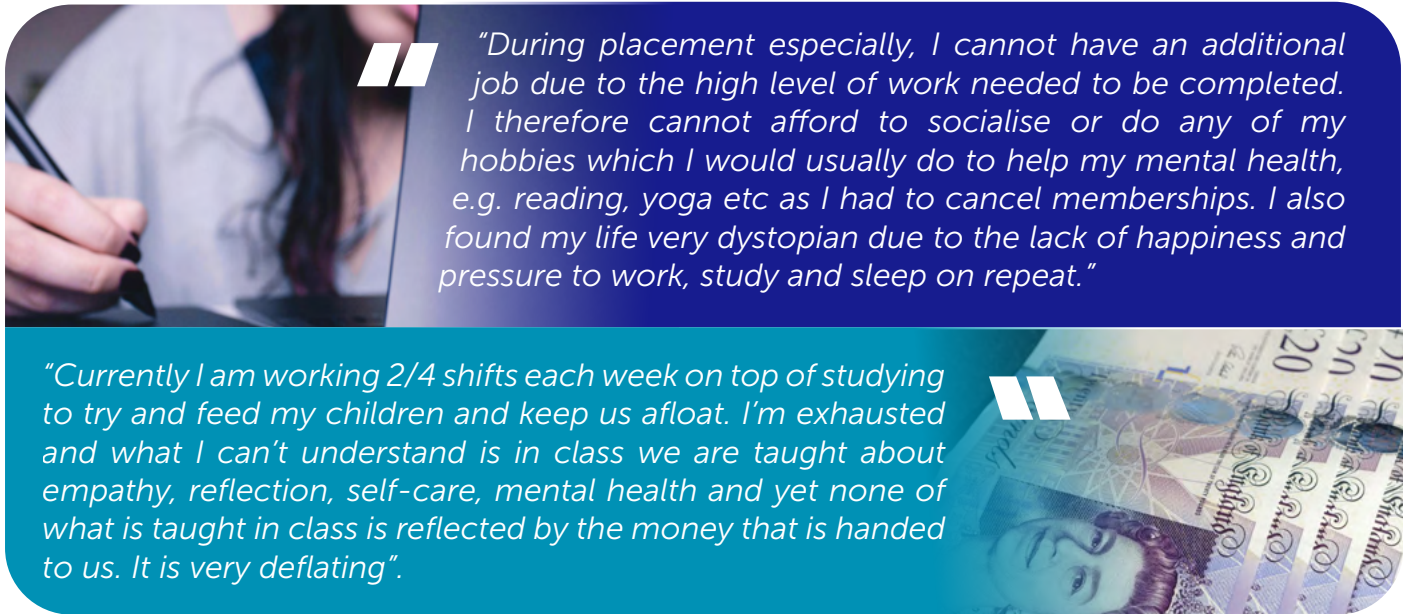
Again, the situation for those with caring responsibilities is more severe. Among this cohort, the number indicating they are just about managing reduces to 25%. Those with caring responsibilities for adults are in an even more concerning position, with 35% claiming they cannot make ends meet, 47% say they are struggling, and fewer than one in five (18%) describe themselves as just about managing.

1 Commons Library Research Briefing, Health inequalities: Cold or damp homes (2023) <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/CBP-9696/CBP-9696.pdf>

Mental health and quality of life

When asked about the effect the increased cost of living has had on their mental health, four in ten (41%) indicated it has had a significant negative impact on their mental health and a similar proportion (37%) stated it has had a moderate negative impact.

Close to one in five (18%) explained it has had a slight negative impact and only 3% reported no impact on their mental health as a result of the increased cost of living.

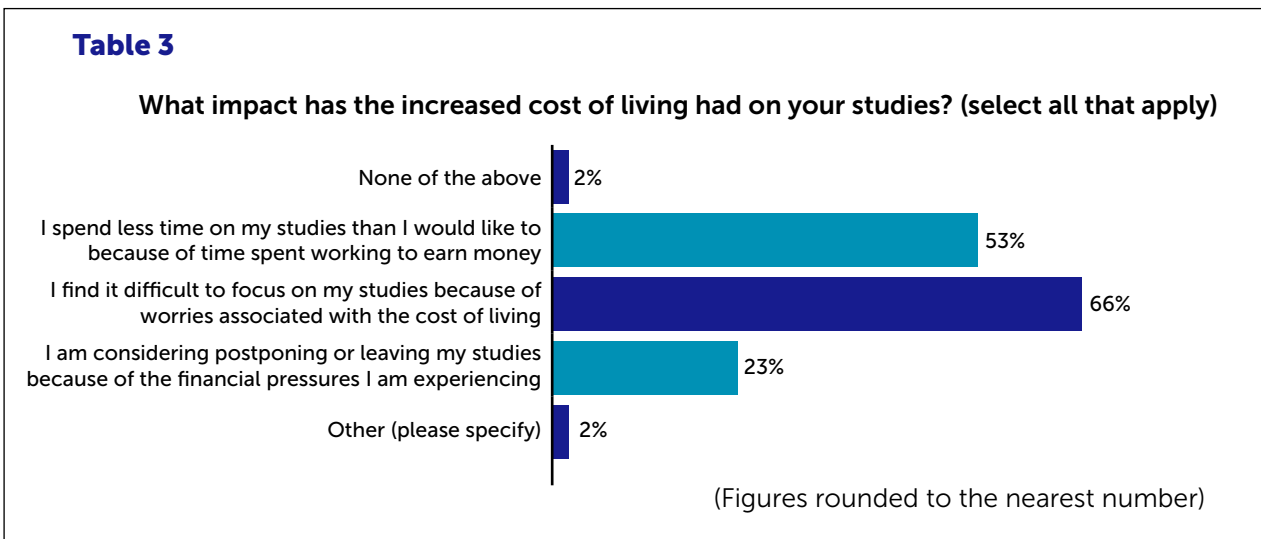


“During placement especially, I cannot have an additional job due to the high level of work needed to be completed. I therefore cannot afford to socialise or do any of my hobbies which I would usually do to help my mental health, e.g. reading, yoga etc as I had to cancel memberships. I also found my life very dystopian due to the lack of happiness and pressure to work, study and sleep on repeat.”

“Currently I am working 2/4 shifts each week on top of studying to try and feed my children and keep us afloat. I’m exhausted and what I can’t understand is in class we are taught about empathy, reflection, self-care, mental health and yet none of what is taught in class is reflected by the money that is handed to us. It is very deflating”.

When asked about the effect the increased cost of living has had on their quality of life, 44% of respondents explained it has had a significant negative impact and 35% reported a moderate negative impact. A slight negative impact was cited by 16% of respondents while only 3% indicated the increased cost of living has had no impact on their quality of life.

To determine the impact the increased cost of living has had on students’ studies, respondents were presented with a list of options and asked to select all that apply. Two thirds (66%) indicated that they find it difficult to focus on their studies because of worries associated with the cost of living. Over half (53%) spend less time on their studies than they would like to because of time spent working to earn money. Perhaps most concerning is the finding that nearly a quarter (23%) of respondents explained they are considering postponing or leaving their studies because of the financial pressures they are experiencing.



The pressures on students with caring responsibilities result in this group being even more likely to abandon their course. Of the carers cohort, 28% are considering leaving their studies due to financial pressures, with those caring for adults most likely to considering leaving (33%).

The likelihood to consider leaving a course also changes with age. Students aged 18 – 24 are least likely to consider dropping out, with 17% falling into this category. Among those aged 25 – 34, 20% consider leaving their course, whereas 30% of 35 – 44 year olds and 28% of respondents aged 45 – 54 fall within this category.

Male respondents are more likely to considering leaving than female respondents—31% compared to 22%. Those approaching the end of their studies are least likely to considering leaving, but those who began their course in 2022 are most likely to be at risk of leaving.

Views on the level of support provided

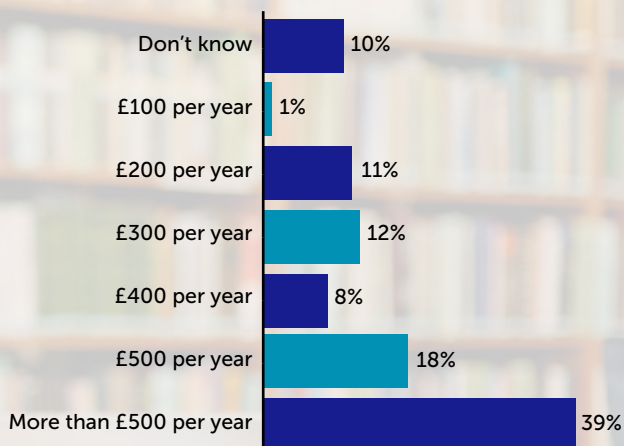
The vast majority of respondents (93%) indicated the £500 received by students as part of the Student Incentive Scheme for travel costs associated with practice placements is not enough to cover the costs they incur.

Nearly six out of ten respondents (58%) state the travel cost allowance needs to increase by at least £500 per year. Almost two thirds (65%) of respondents with caring responsibilities state the allowance needs to rise by this amount.



Table 4

By how much would the travel allowance need to increase to meet the travel costs associated with practice placements?



(Figures rounded to the nearest number)

Recommendation 1

BASW NI and SWU call for an increase in the Student Incentive Scheme travel cost allowance to £1,000 per year and for a commitment from the Department of Health to review and uplift the allowance in line with inflation—taking into consideration the costs of fuel, servicing, insurance, and the impacts of depreciation—on an annual basis.

Respondents were asked to select all relevant options from a list when asked how they use the Student Incentive Scheme £4,000 annual payment. Nine out of ten respondents (91%) explain they use it to pay for daily living costs, 16% explain it contributes to paying their tuition fees, and 13% indicate they use it for other purposes.



"I use it to clear debt accumulated while waiting on payment"

"I try to keep it to top up my income when I'm on placement"

"I use it for childcare and bills to keep my head above water"

"It goes towards unexpected purchases such as, kids school uniforms, food, electric, heating etc"

"I use it to pay my overdraft and mortgage payments"

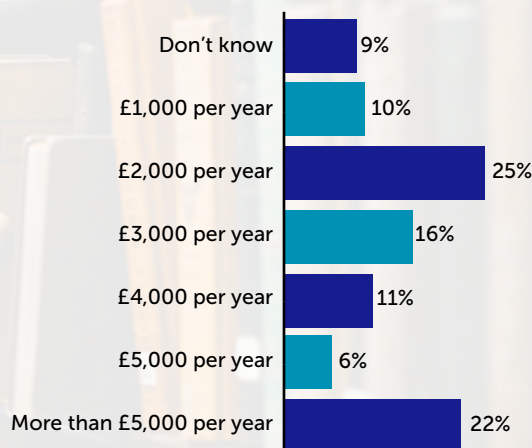


However, 98% of respondents stated that the £4,000 annual payment is not sufficient to meet the costs associated with completing the Degree in Social Work. More than half (55%) state the student incentive scheme should be increased by at least £3,000 per year to meet the costs associated with completing the Degree in Social Work and almost half (45%) of respondents with caring responsibilities state it should increase by at least £4,000.



Table 5

By how much would the annual payment of £4,000 need to increase to meet the costs associated with completing the Degree in Social Work?



(Figures rounded to the nearest number)

Recommendation 2

BASW NI and SWU call for an increase in the Student Incentive Scheme allowance to a minimum of £7,000 per year and for a commitment from the Department of Health to review and uplift the allowance in line with inflation on an annual basis.

Conclusion

Student social workers in Northern Ireland have spoken with one voice to highlight the impacts of the cost-of living crisis and the inadequacy of the Student Incentive Scheme Payment.

Three quarters (73%) of respondents are in paid employment in addition to studying and completing their placement learning opportunities. They are doing all they can to support themselves, and for those with caring responsibilities—over 55% of students surveyed—they are supporting their dependents and family members as well.

Support for them must be improved. This predominantly female student cohort and future social work workforce are the shock absorbers of this relentless cost-of-living crisis and they deserve better.

BASW NI and SWU recognise the many benefits of increasing diversity within our profession, including the important insights offered by those with caring responsibilities and the valuable contribution of social workers with lived experience of receiving services.

Attracting talented and compassionate candidates into the profession is a key aspect of the Department of Health's work on recruitment and retention of staff. However, given the financial pressures facing students, at its current level, the Social Work Student Incentive Scheme is at risk of becoming a misnomer.

It is essential the scheme is increased to meet need, then reviewed annually, to ensure it provides adequate support for student social workers on an ongoing basis.



Appendix

Survey questionnaire

The British Association of Social Workers Northern Ireland (BASW NI) and the Social Workers Union (SWU) are campaigning to increase student incentive scheme payments, as we know how much the rising costs of living are affecting student social workers.

We need you to inform the campaign for an increase in the student incentive scheme. Complete our short survey to make your voice heard!

Please take 10 minutes to complete our questionnaire so we can tell decision makers about your experiences of being a student during the ongoing cost-of-living crisis. **Your responses will be anonymous**, and you have until Sunday 18 February 2024 to take part.

Thank you for your time.

1. Has the increased cost of living affected your standard of living during your time at university? By standard of living we mean the amount of money, comfort, material goods, and necessities that you have available to you on a daily basis.

- Yes
 No

2. What steps have you taken as a result of the increased cost of living? (tick all that apply)

- I am buying less food and essentials
 I am using less electricity
 I am heating my home less
 I am buying cheaper products
 I am shopping around more or switching energy providers
 I am using my savings
 I am borrowing money from friends and family
 I am using more credit or going into debt—including overdrafts, loans, credit cards etc
 I have increased the hours I work or have taken on an additional job
 I am reducing spend on non-essential items and leisure activities
 I am going out/socialising with friends less
 Other (please specify)

3. Which statement best reflects your current financial situation

- I cannot make ends meet
 I am struggling to make ends meet
 I am just about managing
 I am comfortable financially

4. Which statement best reflects the effect the increased cost of living has had on your mental health?

- It has had no impact on my mental health
- It has had a slight negative impact on my mental health
- It has had a moderate negative impact on my mental health
- It has had a significant negative impact on my mental health
- Other (please specify)

5. Can you tell us more about the impacts you have experienced in relation to your mental health?

6. Which statement best reflects the effect the increased cost of living has had on your quality of life?

- It has had no impact on my quality of life
- It has had a slight negative impact on my quality of life
- It has had a moderate negative impact on my quality of life
- It has had a significant negative impact on my quality of life
- Other (please specify)

7. Can you tell us more about the impacts you have experienced in relation to your quality of life?

8. What impact has the increased cost of living had on your studies? (select all that apply)

- I spend less time on my studies than I would like to because of time spent working to earn money
- I find it difficult to focus on my studies because of worries associated with the cost of living
- I am considering postponing or leaving my studies because of the financial pressures I am experiencing
- Other (please specify)

- None of the above

9. Do you have caring responsibilities? (select all that apply)

- I am the parent / guardian of a child or children aged under 18
- I am the parent / guardian of a child or children aged under 18 with additional needs
- I care for an adult or adults
- I care for an adult or adults with additional needs
- I do not have caring responsibilities

10. Have you been impacted negatively financially as a result of your caring responsibilities?

- Yes
- No
- Don't know

11. In what ways have you been impacted negatively financially as a result of your caring responsibilities?

12. Is the £500 you receive as part of the Student Incentive Scheme for travel costs associated with your practice placements enough to cover the costs you incur?

- It is enough to cover my travel costs
- It is not enough to cover my travel costs

13. By how much would the travel allowance need to increase to meet the travel costs associated with practice placements?

- £100 per year
- £200 per year
- £300 per year
- £400 per year
- £500 per year
- More than £500 per year
- Don't know

14. How do you use the annual payment of £4,000 that you receive from the Student Incentive Scheme? (select all that apply)

- It contributes to paying my tuition fees
- I use it to pay for daily living costs
- Other (please specify)

15. Is the annual payment of £4,000 sufficient to meet the costs associated with completing the Degree in Social Work?

- Yes
- No

16. By how much would the annual payment of £4,000 need to increase to meet the costs associated with completing the Degree in Social Work?

- £1,000 per year
- £2,000 per year
- £3,000 per year
- £4,000 per year
- £5,000 per year
- More than £5,000 per year
- Don't know

17. Please feel free to add any other comments or thoughts that you feel might be useful in helping us to understand the current situation for social work students.

18. What is your age?

- 18-24
- 25-34
- 35-44
- 45-54
- 55-64
- 64+

19. How would you describe your gender?

- Female
- Male
- Prefer not to say
- Prefer to self-describe

20. Do you undertake paid work?

- Yes
- No

21. When did you begin your current social work course?

- 2020
- 2021
- 2022
- 2023
- Other (please specify)

If you would like to contribute further and be part of a focus group to shape our campaign asks, please contact noeleen.higgins@basw.co.uk

To find out more about this campaign and our other activities, please visit www.basw.co.uk, www.swu-union.org.uk or follow us on social media.

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BASW
Northern Ireland

The professional association for
social work and social workers

SWU Social
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