

## Cost-of-living support for students

Russell Group universities have, once again, committed tens of millions of pounds of financial and non-financial support to help students in the face of ongoing cost-of-living pressures.

### How cost-of-living pressures are impacting students

Rising living costs are impacting every aspect of students' lives and experience at university including their studies, ability to form social connections and their mental health and wellbeing. Students who are already disadvantaged are some of those being hit the hardest by financial pressures.

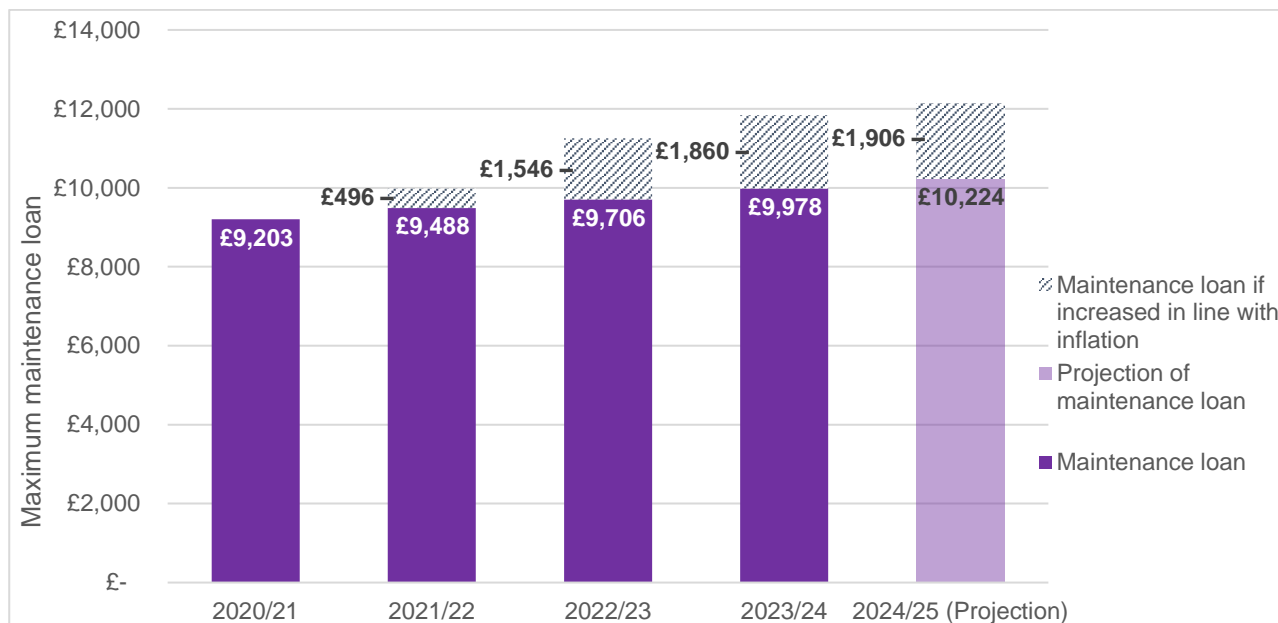
A survey at the start of 2023 of students at Russell Group universities<sup>1</sup> found that:

- 94% reported having concerns about the cost-of-living crisis.
- 1 in 4 were regularly going without food and other necessities because they could not afford them, rising to over 3 in 10 for students from the most socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds.
- More than half had stopped taking part in extracurricular activities because of the cost of doing so.

Further studies have found the majority of students feel the cost-of-living crisis has affected their studies<sup>2</sup> and that the maintenance loan isn't sufficient to cover their living costs<sup>3</sup>, with an increasing number taking up paid employment to cover the shortfall: 55% of students in 2023, up from 45% in 2022.<sup>4</sup>

**Russell Group universities are offering both financial and non-financial support to assist students experiencing financial pressures** (see illustrative examples in Annex A). As well as targeted financial support for at-risk students through bursaries and hardship funds, our universities are making sure students have access to warm spaces and subsidised food, as well as increasing campus employment opportunities and employing trained money advisers. These initiatives are funded from universities' existing budgets.

The financial challenges faced by students are compounded by the fact that **the Government has failed to raise maintenance loans in line with inflation**. Russell Group analysis shows that, should the DfE uprate maintenance loans for 2024/25 by the most recent projection for inflation Q1 2025 (2.5%), a full-time student living away from home outside London will receive £10,244 per year, leaving them £1,906 short of the £12,130 the loan would be if the Government had raised it in line with inflation since 2020/21 (see Figure 1).<sup>5</sup>



**Figure 1:** If DfE had increased the student maintenance loan in line with inflation since 2020/21, students would be £1,906 better off.

While universities are doing what they can to help with rising living costs, wider support is needed for all students. During the pandemic, the Russell Group worked closely with the Government to keep students safe and ensure their education can continue. Now, we want to help ease the growing financial pressures on students by calling for **an uplift to maintenance loans** to reflect actual average inflation each year, and the **reintroduction of maintenance grants** for the most disadvantaged students, to complement the range of support on offer from our universities.

The Government should also **review the parental earnings threshold** below which students are eligible for the maximum level of maintenance support. The threshold has been frozen in cash terms at £25,000 since 2008. Had this threshold increased with earnings it would now be closer to £35,000 and more students would be eligible for the maximum level of maintenance support.

## Types of support

**Russell Group universities have strengthened measures to support students impacted by cost-of-living pressures.** Some have expanded bursary support whilst others have increased other financial and non-financial initiatives. Overall, the support provided by Russell Group universities equates to **tens of millions of pounds each year.**

## Financial support

**Bursaries and assistance Funds** – All Russell Group Universities offer financial support for students, through hardship or financial assistance funds, subject to eligibility criteria based on family income. Some members have introduced further targeted support for at-risk student groups, including the automatic provision of core bursaries or schemes for care-experienced students.

**Employment support** – Our universities are extending on-campus job roles and promoting other employment opportunities near campus where students can balance part-time employment alongside their course.

**Other financial support** – Other measures include reviewing and reducing any ‘hidden’ course or service costs, reducing costs for activities or sports, and providing transport discounts. Where some universities own

for-let properties, they have also reduced the cost of rent for some students. Other Russell Group universities have helped support the cost of graduation, for example by reducing the costs of gown rentals.

## Non-financial support

**Food-security initiatives** – In partnership with their Students' Unions, a number of Russell Group members have opened food pantries or food banks for students on campus. Others have introduced free breakfast programmes, reduced-cost meals on campus, and access to kitchens for students to cook. This year, one-third of Russell Group universities operated food banks to support their students.<sup>6</sup>

**Physical and wellbeing support** – Many of our universities are keeping study and social spaces open longer for student to keep warm if they are struggling to keep their homes warm. In addition, many students are offered free period products and free access to on-campus showers to help reduce the cost of bills.

**Access to financial information** – Russell Group universities are helping students to manage their finances better, including by providing guidance on keeping costs down, information on financial assistance available and access to trained money advisers.

**Mental health support** – Every Russell Group university offers a wide range of information, advice, and mental health services to help students whose wellbeing is being affected by any aspect of student life including financial worries.

**Other Forms of non-financial support** – Other examples of non-financial support include offering free or reduced-cost transit, long-term technology loans, working with the local councils and MPs to support student accommodation needs, and offering free events so students have opportunities to socialise.

## Specific support for disadvantaged or underrepresented students

Although the rising cost-of-living impacts all students, those from low-income backgrounds, those with care experience, LGBTQ+ students, and those with disabilities, are more at risk of financial hardship.<sup>7</sup> Alongside existing widening participation initiatives, **many Russell Group universities have ringfenced financial support or initiatives for students from underrepresented backgrounds**, as defined by each institution. There is no single way to support these students, but some examples include:

- The **University of Southampton** has created three funds: Health and Wellbeing Fund, Technology Grant, and Commuter Fund, all of which are ringfenced for students from backgrounds currently underrepresented in higher education.
- **LSE** offers a rent guarantor scheme for students, which particularly supports low-income students whose families might not be in the position to act as a guarantor.
- **UCL** provided an additional £500k of accommodation bursaries in 2023/24 to support first-year undergraduate students from lower-income backgrounds to access housing.
- **Durham University's** Durham Grant Scheme (DGS) is a non-repayable bursary for UK undergraduates from lower-income households and was accessed by more than 3,000 students in 2022/23. The university has increased the DGS bursary for three consecutive years, with an increase of 6.7% for 2024/25. DGS now extends support to middle-income families, meaning that everyone eligible for a means-tested maintenance loan from the Student Loans Company will also receive a Durham Grant.
- The **University of Edinburgh** offers a Participation Grant of up to £300 to assist underrepresented students and those eligible for scholarships with travel, equipment, and any costs of participation for taking part in joining student societies and sporting activities that enhance their time at university.
- The **University of Manchester** has a Work Experience Bursary which enables students who qualify for financial support from the University and/or the UK Government to apply for up to £1000 to support work experience opportunities each academic year of their studies.

## Annex A: Further examples of support for students offered by Russell Group universities

Some examples of financial and non-financial support provided by Russell Group universities can be found below. The nature of the support provided by each institution is tailored to local and institutional circumstances, including their student population. This is not a comprehensive list of support on offer to students but highlights the range of initiatives in place at our universities. Further examples can be found on universities' own websites.

- Together with its Students' Union, the **University of Birmingham** offers free supermarket vouchers and opened a Community Pantry for those in need and ran a Cost-of-Living Fair for all students with a clothing exchange and workshops on money management and help looking for part-time work.
- Over the last five years, the **University of Bristol** has increased its hardship fund by 200%. This fund has been simplified and extended to increase the number of students that can be reached.
- The **University of Cambridge** has changed its bursary scheme to support Medical and Veterinary students in their clinical years who were impacted by a deficit in funding, meaning these students are now entitled to the highest level of bursary for a 12-month programme.
- **Cardiff University** has committed a total package of £4m to support students in 2023/24 including a hardship fund for all students studying 60 or more credits, 'Together at Cardiff' bursaries (for care experienced, carers, estranged and military experienced students) and additional bursaries including support for graduation, summer accommodation and travel.
- **Durham University** employs a dedicated Student Money Adviser who advises students on money, budgeting, managing bills and payments and entitlement to benefits. Students can make 1-2-1 appointments with the Adviser, attend drop-in hours, or visit one of the roadshow events.
- The **University of Edinburgh** has a dedicated Advice Place with a team of professionally trained caseworkers ready to support students in all aspects of student life including budgeting and signposting to discounts and other money-saving resources.
- The **University of Exeter** has increased eligibility for their student support package for undergraduate home students with a household income of up to £30k p.a.
- The **University of Glasgow** has more than doubled its student hardship support, alongside providing a range of practical services and advice, including accessible, warm spaces on-campus, low-cost hot food and wellbeing support.
- **Imperial College London** has strengthened its Student Support Fund, which supports current students who face unexpected financial hardship with their costs of living by more than doubling the amount of support available to students.
- In addition to providing financial support to over 8,500 students, **King's College London** has recruited a team of Money Mentors who work with the Money & Housing Advice Service to support students who might be facing financial difficulty.
- The **University of Leeds** increased its student Financial Assistance Fund almost five-fold to £1.9M, with £500,000 ring-fenced within this to support postgraduate researchers (PGRs).
- Alongside the introduction of a food pantry as a direct response to the cost-of-living crisis, the **University of Liverpool** has recruited Student Money Coaches to provide peer-to-peer guidance which enhances its existing Money Advice and Guidance Team.
- **LSE** has increased its Student Hardship Fund by a further 50% for the 2023/24 academic year and runs regular online financial support drop-in sessions for help with emergency financial assistance and advice on applying for financial support.
- The **University of Manchester** has been working to increase awareness of existing financial support packages including its Travel Bursary, Work Experience Bursary and Cost of Living Support

Fund through various student communications channels. The University promotes the Students' Union Access to Recreation Grant, providing up to £250 for recreational activities.

- **Newcastle University** has increased support available to students to over £1.7m. This includes an increase in student financial support, participation bursaries through the Students' Union and additional jobs for students on Jobs on Campus. Other support includes £1 hot meal offer and the introduction of the Food Fob, which when pre-loaded with funds is topped up with 15% extra free.
- The **University of Nottingham** is trialling an extension to its free "Hopper Bus" service into popular areas for students during the evenings to help cut the costs of transport and runs the Cupboard Project in collaboration with the Student's Union, a free resource to pick up and drop off much-needed provisions, such as hygiene and period items, foodstuffs, and clothing.
- The **University of Oxford** offers grants of up to £3,000 for all UK students experiencing a shortfall in meeting essential living costs.
- **Queen Mary University of London** works with its Students' Union to understand the best way to support its students. In addition to increased hardship support distributed to students via the Financial Assistance Fund and dedicated support from the Advice & Counselling Team, this has included the distribution of food vouchers and the expansion of the Student Union food pantry.
- **Queens University Belfast** has teamed up with its Students' Union to, among other interventions, provide a Pantry as an ongoing campaign to mitigate the impact of the cost-of-living crisis. As of November 2023, the pantry had been accessed 5,000+ times since its September opening.
- The **University of Sheffield** has committed £2m to support students by providing a one-off, capped payment for students facing financial difficulties. Students eligible for a bursary because of their household income, postcode, care leaver status, caring responsibilities or estrangement from their parents have received a 10% uplift this academic year.
- The **University of Southampton** offers paid opportunities for students to work with the University as Money Champions, which offers part-time work to students while also increasing financial education amongst them.
- The Activities Participation Fund at **UCL** helps students participate in extra-curricular or co-curricular activities. As a subset of this fund, there is also a Graduate Support fund which helps to support students with the costs associated with graduation.
- The **University of Warwick** has created a program called 'Rock up & Play' which offers free sports and physical activities for students and staff allowing students to get active while reducing the costs associated with organised sport.
- As a direct response to student feedback about the most pressing challenges and the rising prices of private rental accommodations, the **University of York** has evolved its financial support to offer an Off Campus Rent Grant.

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<sup>1</sup> Russell Group Students' Union Student Cost of Living Report: [\[Here\]](#)

<sup>2</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute and Advance HE in the *Student Academic Experience Survey 2023*: [\[Here\]](#)

<sup>3</sup> Office for National Statistics [\[Here\]](#).

<sup>4</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute and Advance HE in the *Student Academic Experience Survey 2023*: [\[Here\]](#)

<sup>5</sup> Figure 1 shows how the maximum maintenance loan would have inflated by RPIx in 2020/21 terms (Source: OBR) compared with actual increases in cash terms of maintenance support (Source: House of Commons Library: The value of student maintenance support [\[Here\]](#))

<sup>6</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute from the Report *How to Beat a Cost-of-Learning Crisis: Universities' Support for Students* [\[Here\]](#)

<sup>7</sup> Higher Education Policy Institute and Advance HE in the *Student Academic Experience Survey 2023* [\[Here\]](#)