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# Union Futures: The impact of NSS Q26

A report on the findings of a national study exploring the impact of the new NSS Question 26 on students' unions

#### **Foreword**

With the change to the National Student Survey (NSS) question on students' unions in the form of the new Question 26 (Q26), unions faced a fresh challenge, and opportunity, to demonstrate the extent and value of their contribution to the student experience and to academic life within UK universities. Bringing together 18 unions as part of a joint research venture, *The Q26 Impact Study* was the first of Alterline's *Union Futures* projects and was delivered within four months, following the publication of the amended NSS questionnaire, yielding a core dataset of over 17,000 students. The project was intended to enable participating unions to formulate a proactive response to the new NSS question prior to the initiation of the 2017 survey, as well as being a resource for reflecting and acting on the subsequent results. This report, *Union Futures: The impact of NSS Q26*, provides a summary of the key findings from the project for a wider audience beyond the participating unions, to allow the voice of the thousands of students who contributed to the project to be heard, as policy priorities and performance metrics in UK higher education continue to evolve.

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### **Changes to NSS**

Some of the biggest changes to the NSS questionnaire in 2017 have come in the form of three completely new sections (titled learning opportunities, learning community, and student voice), encompassing nine questions, including a new students' union question within the student voice section. For students' unions, the change means a shift away from a broad measure of satisfaction to one that asks students specifically about the union's impact on the academic dimension of their university experience.

The previous NSS survey asked students 23 questions in six sections, on: teaching, assessment and feedback, academic support, organisation and management, learning resources, and personal development. The new survey is slightly longer, with 27 questions in eight sections, adding the three mentioned above and removing the section on personal development.

In the previous NSS, the question about students' unions, Q23, asked students to indicate the extent to which they agreed with the statement:

"Overall I am satisfied with my students' union (association or guild)."

In the new NSS survey, the students' union question is now Q26, and instead asks students to indicate the extent to which they agree that:

"The students' union (association or guild) effectively represents students' academic interests."

Q26 is the fourth and final question in the student voice section of the 2017 survey. The three preceding questions ask about: having the right opportunities to provide feedback on their course; staff valuing students' views and opinions about their course; and, how clear it is that students' feedback on their course has been acted on.

### Aims of the study

The Q26 Impact Study set out to help participating students' unions prepare for the effects of the changes to the NSS, by providing robust and rapid intelligence, as an evidence base for action. Gathering both quantitative and qualitative data, it addressed the methodological implications of the change from Q23 to Q26 for the rating and ranking of union performance, examined which aspects of union activity students assess and prioritise when answering Q26, and analysed the relationship between Q26 and other measures. The results offered a wide-ranging and detailed assessment of the impact of the change, posing a number of challenges for the sector, as well as adding to existing research on the expectations of today's undergraduate student population. The findings were also intended to be a useful reference for both students' unions and universities once the results of the 2017 NSS are published and the full impact of Q26 is known, in terms of aiding understanding and informing strategic responses.

#### Recommendations

Based on the findings of the Q26 Impact Study, a set of recommendations for the sector are outlined below:

#### Address four key areas in union campaigning:

- Helping students be more employable when they graduate
- · Quality of teaching
- Placements/work-based experience
- Mental health support

Three-quarters of survey respondents chose at least one of these four items as counting among the three areas of activity they felt it was most important for their union to campaign on to represent their academic interests.

#### Make student representatives key actors

Student reps are the most visible and accessible source of representation for students within the academic sphere - and just over 6 in 10 survey respondents in this study said they would be likely or very likely to contact a student rep to support them in their academic interests, compared to 46% who would turn to their union's advice service. Where reps operate on behalf of the students' union they can therefore make or break perceptions of the performance of the union on Q26.

Reps need to listen to us moresometimes they act like they're a 'club' and don't seem approachable. ? ?

> Female, 18-21, 2nd Year, Q26 response: 'Mostly agree'

This study indicates that student reps must: have sufficient power to make the student voice audible; be seen as approachable by both staff and students; be properly trained; understand the role of the students' union and their function within it: and be true ambassadors for the union.

#### Catch them all and keep them all: third years and non-traditional students

Q26 scores are lower for third years in this study than for those in earlier years. As students progress through their course, their union must continue to demonstrate its relevance to them and their academic interests.

Students who are full time, under-21, have no dependants and no disabilities are more likely to rate their union highly on Q26 than those students who have historically been seen as non-traditional. These latter students are actually growing as a percentage of the student population and unions need to continue to improve the work they do with this group, as well as being attentive to differential Q26 scores across subject and faculty.

# Mind the messaging gap around academic

Students interpret the wording of Q26 in different ways and this makes meeting their expectations in relation to representation of their academic interests challenging. Those students who interpret Q26 as referring to subjects and activities they are 'interested in' may be more impressed by a union with a broad offer, crossing the boundary between the curricular and extra-curricular. Whereas for those who interpret the term as referring to aspects of their academic experience that it is 'in their interest' for their institution to get right, advertising a broad offer risks obscuring many good efforts to support students in their academic endeavours that are undertaken, sometimes necessarily, with little fanfare. This is undoubtedly a dilemma but one that must be kept in mind.

Academic interests include societies around various areas of study and culture, as well as team sports, hobbies, and clubs. 99

> Male, 18-21, 3rd year, Q26 response: 'Definitely agree'

#### Communicate the small wins

Students' unions often talk a lot about the big campaigns that run across campus or the ones that include large groups of students, yet little is said about their work with individual students. Individual cases where the union has helped support and advise a student may better exemplify how the union represents students' academic interests yet they often remain under the radar. Campaigns that focus on telling these stories can support the union's case, even with those who may never use those services themselves. Cognitive analysis in the study of how Q26 is answered by students suggests that both their understanding of the term 'academic interests' and their familiarity with the activities of the union come into play in this process.

My housemate contacted them when he was diagnosed with a mental illness and his course convenor refused to take it into consideration. so that's the only example I can think of where someone's gone to them in lieu of academic support being inadequate. 99

Female, 22-25, 3rd year, Q26 response: 'Neither agree nor disagree'

#### Communicate where and how the union fits into the landscape of the institution

Universities have long provided a range of pastoral and academic support services, from accommodation through to careers and many points in between. As the Teaching Excellence Framework shifts focus more to learning gain and academic community (amongst other things), many universities are bolstering their support services. It is important that the union's services complement

the university's whilst at the same time maintaining the independence required for certain types of personal and academic support. Joined-up provision makes sense and both the provision and signposting of services by the union need to be clear and intelligible to the student body.

#### **Build relationships across the institution**

For academic issues, and for many personal ones, course tutors are often the first port of call for students seeking help. These relationships are important, and sometimes instrumental, in helping a student achieve academic success. For the union, it is vital to build relationships with these academics, both to offer them an avenue for problems they are ill-equipped to address and to understand and support tutors in doing what they do best. Being clear about the role of course representatives, course tutors and the various support services will help students and academics alike to better understand and appreciate the union's role on campus.

### Spotlight on Q26: exploring the terminology

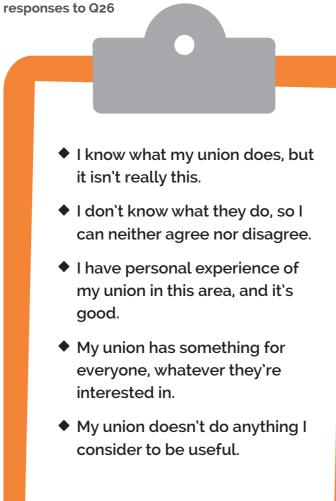
Participants in this study were asked to explain their understanding of the term 'academic interests', after having answered the guestion in the format of NSS Q26. Analysis of the findings indicate a broadly two-fold understanding of the term. Firstly it is understood as relating to subjects or topics that students are interested in, and which are associated in some way with their academic and career endeavours - this might be catered to through the hosting of guest speakers, or the running of workshops and events that might broaden their knowledge or skills around and beyond their course. Secondly it is interpreted as referring to aspects of their academic experience that it is in their interest (that is, advantageous to them) for their institution to get right, from teaching and learning resources to more pastoral and personal support required to underpin their academic progress and achievement.

While the activities that these two interpretations of the term translate into could overlap, they nevertheless imply two quite distinct ways of making sense of 'academic interests', and raise questions about the validity and reliability of the terminology of Q26. A comparison of responses to the Q26 and Q23 replications in this study - shown here in the next section - suggests less clarity of feeling evoked in response to Q26, as indicated by the greater proportion of responses in the 'neither agree nor disagree' category, which is consistent with this picture of Q26 as a problematic metric.

Indeed, a comparison of the responses participating students gave when asked to answer Q26 in the survey and when asked to do so again during the focus groups found that nearly half (14 out of 29 focus group participants) gave a different answer the second time around.

Having been asked to answer Q26 for a second time, focus group participants were then prompted to explain the thought process they went through in order to arrive at the answer they gave. A summary of their key thoughts is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Cognitive analysis: key thoughts driving



66 It was clear in my mind because when I think of the union. I think about pastoral care, representation of student politics and policy change, and general help in giving students a voice about things they care about within the university, like representation and diversity, which is great, but I don't consider any of those things 'academic interests. ? ?

> Female, 22-25, 3rd year, Q26 response: 'Neither agree nor disagree'

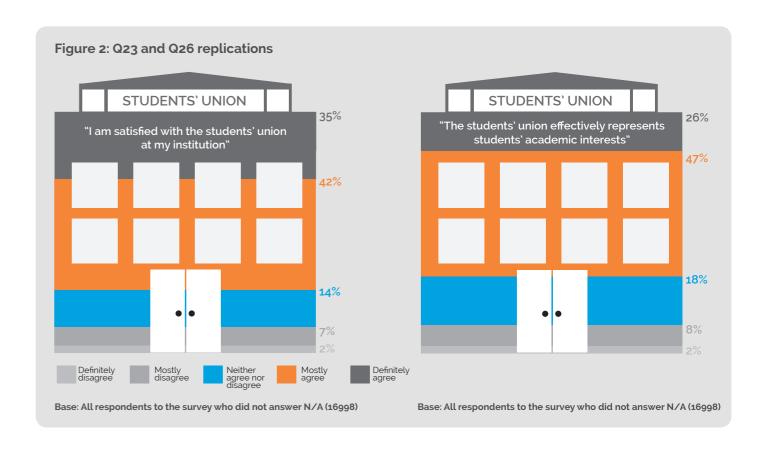
### Q26 versus Q23: a comparison

The Q26 Impact Study survey replicated Q23 from the old NSS and Q26 from the new NSS, allowing a comparison of the two measures.

Figure 2 below shows the results across all participating institutions. The overall distribution of scores for the two questions is similar, and is confirmed by a correlation test which found a strong positive correlation (r = 0.617, where 1 is complete correlation and o is no correlation) between the two measures.

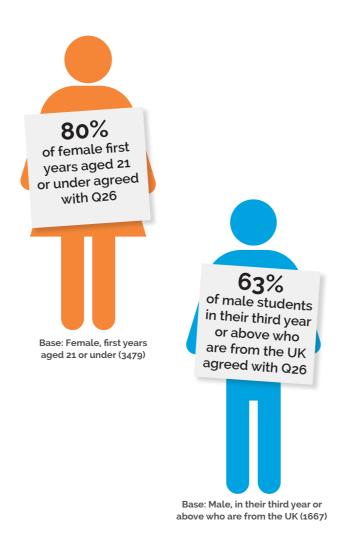
Differences in responses are most prominent in the 'definitely agree' and 'neither agree nor disagree' categories. The Q26 replication receives just

over a guarter of responses in the 'definitely agree' category (26%), compared with over a third (35%) for the Q23 replication, whilst the 'neither agree nor disagree' category also increases by 4 percentage points in the Q26 replication, approaching a fifth of respondents, at 18%. This suggests that the strength or clarity of opinion about the guestion statement is diminished when students are presented with Q26, compared to Q23, a finding that supports the qualitative data reported in the previous section, indicating a lack of clarity in understanding of Q26's key term, 'academic interests'.



This comparison of the two measures suggests that the 2017 NSS will not see a wholesale overturning of the union league table, but that some noticeable movement in positions should be expected. Indeed, institutional comparison showed that universities in the Million+ or University Alliance mission groups for the most part achieved the highest Q26 scores, with Russell Group and Former 94 group universities, lower down the ranking. However, caution must be taken in drawing conclusions from this about the sector as a whole, based on a sample of only 18 institutions.

It is also important to note that the overall sample in this study is more engaged than the student population at large - just over a fifth said they had been a student rep, compared with an average of just over 2% of the total student population who are undergraduate reps at institutions participating in this study - and that, for participants at two-thirds of the participating unions, third years rated their union more positively on the Q23 replication than did respondents answering Q23 in the NSS in 2016 at that university.





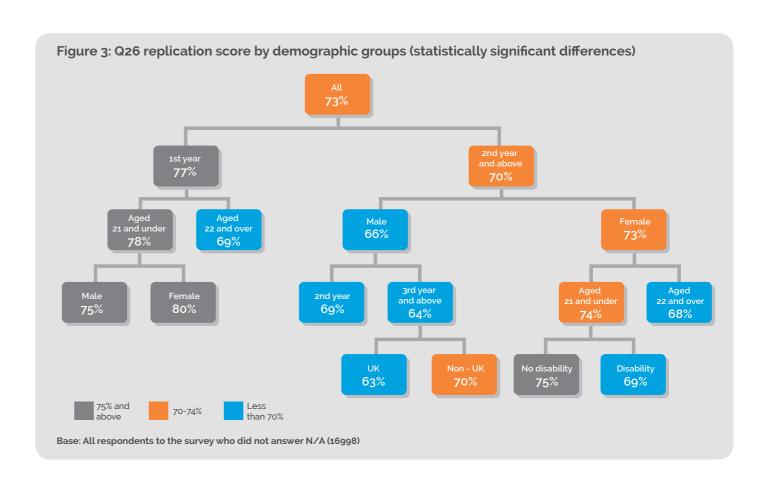
# How Q26 responses differ across demographic groups

Figure 3 shows a CRT (Classification and Regression Tree) diagram that breaks down student responses to Q26 by major demographic groups, indicating the scores for groups within groups. The Q26 replication score in this study is highest for those who are first years, aged 21 or under, and female (80%). By contrast the lowest average score in the chart is for male students, in their third year or above, who are from the UK (63%).

This analysis indicates that by the time students complete the NSS in their third year of study, they are significantly less likely to rate their union highly on Q26 than they are in the earlier years of their degree. The same pattern was found when comparing third year scores on the Q23 replication in this study with the rest of the sample.

A comparison of data from individual institutions in this study found that the decline in the Q26 replication score for third years tended to be smaller at universities in the Million+ or University Alliance mission group than for those at participating Russell Group or Former 94 mission group universities. Once again caution must be taken in drawing conclusions from this, based as it is on a sample of only 18 institutions.

The CRT procedure used to generate Figure 3 divides groups that have statistically significant differences in the value analysed, suggesting that these differences can be generalised to the wider student population. However simple comparison of group averages in the study sample showed other differences which, whilst not statistically significant, may be worthy of consideration. Students aged 30 or above, who have dependants, those studying 'non-traditional' or vocational courses as opposed to more 'traditional' subjects, and students living in privately-rented accommodation or a home being bought with a mortgage, yielded lower scores than students in other categories on the measures in question (e.g. those without dependants, those living in halls of residence).



### Prior student engagement and Q26 scores

The relationship between prior engagement with the union and Q26 scores was explored, using the data presented in Figure 4. This shows the reported awareness and usage of six key student union services (academic societies, non-academic societies, union building/spaces, course or student reps, union advice service/ centre and sabbs/ student officers/ exec team) along with the proportion of students in each category who agreed or strongly agreed with the Q26 statement.

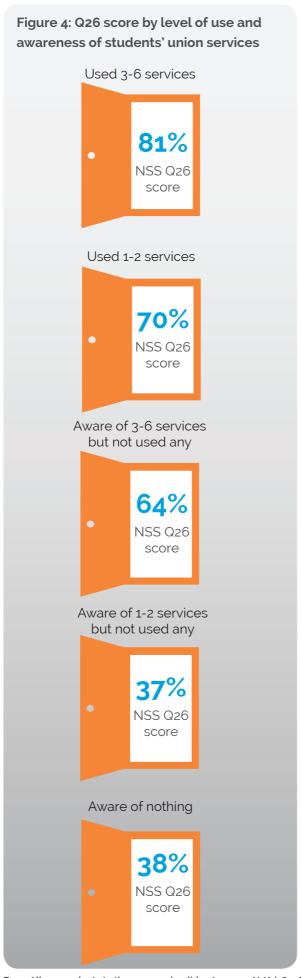
These data show that greater prior usage and awareness of union services is associated with higher scoring on Q26, with a particularly marked percentage point difference between those who are aware of 3-6 services and those aware of only 1-2 services.

Of course, the way in which usage and awareness interacts with other factors is likely to be complex participants in later years of study are more likely to have used multiple union services, but they also produce lower Q26 scores on average than those in earlier years, as reported above. Recency of exposure must be taken into consideration, as well as the relationship between recency and length of university career - a first year who knows little about their union may assume there is much they are yet to discover about their union; a student who has survived to their fourth year without contact with their union may guite reasonably place little value on its services.

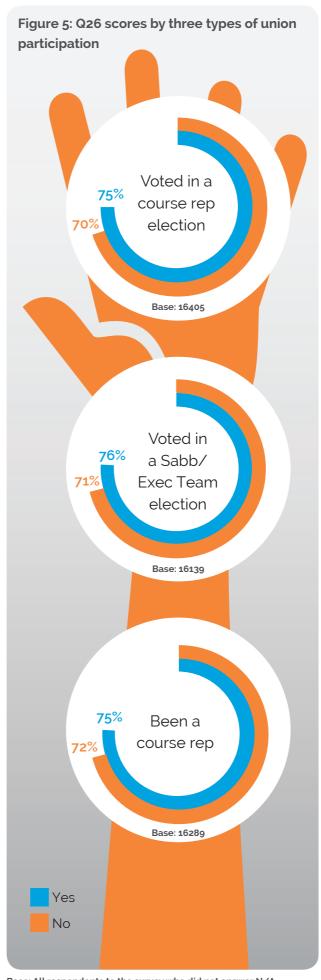
Nevertheless, the fact remains that the top-line figures count and suggest that just having a good awareness of the range of services offered by the union may have a positive influence on a student's perceptions, as measured by Q26.

66 They seem to completely ignore the medical school. We are not properly represented and, because half of our course is off campus, we may as well not exist. ? ?

> Female, 26-29, 4th year, Q26 response: 'Definitely disagree'



Base: All respondents to the survey who did not answer N/A (16998)



Base: All respondents to the survey who did not answer N/A

Another important aspect of union engagement is participation in its democratic processes. Figure 5 shows the Q26 score broken down by three types of participation, indicating that each is associated with slightly higher Q26 scores than non-participation.

However, the largest difference between the two groups is only 5 percentage points, and whilst this is certainly not trivial, it suggests that there are other stronger factors at work. Indeed, some people may be more, rather than less, exercised to vote or to stand as a rep if their experiences of their union have been negative - indeed, some candidates in union elections put forward manifestos emphasising the wrongs that they intend to right if elected, potentially attracting the support of students who are more sceptical about or critical of the activities of the union, as well as those who positively rate the union's purpose and powers.

66 Being a course rep and the president of an academic society I know they do work very closely with us to sort out academic issues. I can see. though, if you're not involved in that process why it seems like they're not that involved. ??

> Female, 22-25, 3rd year, Q26 response: 'Mostly agree'



### Other measures: responses and correlation with Q26

The online Q26 Impact Study survey replicated the other questions in the 'Student Voice' section of the new NSS survey. The item from this section that received the highest positive score was 'Overall I am satisfied with the quality of the course' (83% agreed), whilst 'It is clear how students' feedback on the course has been acted on' received the lowest score (57% agreed). The latter could be an issue that students' unions might consider campaigning on, as part of an effort to raise their profile within the realm of course-related concerns.

In order to illuminate students' responses to Q26 tests of correlation were run with other questions in the survey. The only variable found to have a strong correlation with Q26 was the Q23 replication. Those with a moderate strength correlation are shown in Figure 6.

It is unsurprising to find that the top three items in Figure 6 (orange icons) should most strongly correlate with Q26, given that their focus on academic needs and interests clearly echoes the wording of Q26. What is perhaps more surprising is that the relationship is not stronger, and this may once again reflect the divergence of interpretations of the specific terminology of Q26, discussed above.

66 My union has been great with my student life so far, especially with my academics. I spoke to them about my lecturer and they made sure something was done about it. ? ?

> Female, 26-29, 1st Year, Q26 response: 'Mostly agree'

Figure 6: Questions which correlate moderately with Q26 replication

#### **Correlation value**



My students' union works to ensure the academic needs of students are met

I understand what the students' union is achieving for me and my academic interests Base: 16998

My students' union makes sure I get the best possible academic outcome from my course Base: 16998

My students' union helps me make the most of my time as a student Base: 16998

My students' union is easy-to-use Base: 16998

I would turn to the students' union if I needed help and advice

Base: 16008

My students' union communicates well with me Base: 16998

My students' union offers a range of relevant opportunities, events and services



The students' union Sabbatical/ Student Officers/ Exec Team effectively represent me

Base: 16997

Base: All respondents to the survey who did not answer N/A

It is also possible that some of those answering the question 'I understand what the students' union is achieving for me and my academic interests' positively might feel that their good understanding of what their students' union is and is not achieving for them and their academic interests has led them to conclude that the answer is 'not a great deal', as was the case for some of the focus group participants in this study.

Nevertheless, the data regarding how students want their academic interests to be represented suggest that inadequate publicity and information are more likely to be a missed opportunity for unions than a potential source of harmful exposure. These issues are touched upon in the wording of some of the other key correlating items shown in Figure 6, including those regarding communication and ease-of-use, indicating that on average, positive perceptions of these aspects of union activity are associated with positive ratings for Q26.

The questions not featuring wording so clearly linked to Q26 (that is, references to the 'academic') but which nevertheless have a moderate correlation with the Q26 replication appear next to blue icons in Figure 6. These show that a general sense of the union helping the student get the best out of their time at university, a willingness to turn to their union for advice (whatever kind of advice that might be), and the feeling that the union's offer is relevant, are all associated with positive Q26 scores. The crucial underlying question here is about the fit between the individual student's priorities and the union offer, since what the union can do to help him or her 'make the most of my time at university' and what services and opportunities it can offer that the student will deem 'relevant' depends on their individual expectations and needs.



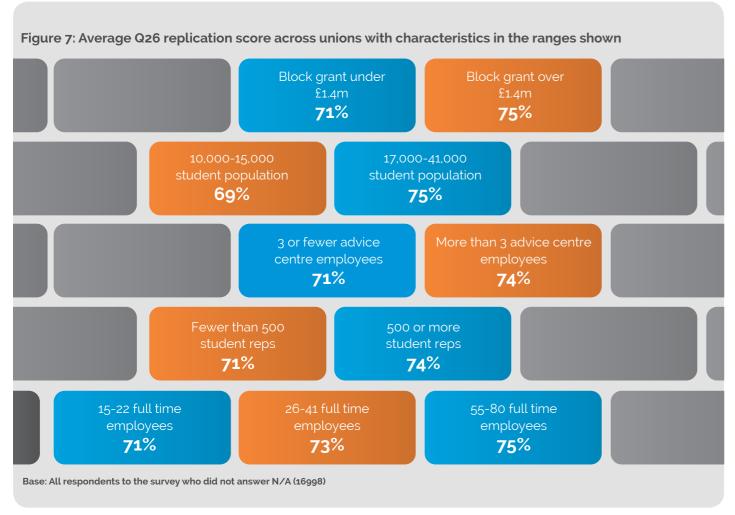
#### Union-level measures and Q26

We asked individual students' unions to tell us about a number of characteristics of their organisation and examined the relationship between these and the Q26 replication scores, as shown in Figure 7. With only 18 unions providing a single data point for each metric, it is not possible to draw any clear conclusions about the relationship between these characteristics and Q26 scores in general. However, these data would appear to suggest that on average 'bigger means better' for the Q26 score - a larger block grant, larger numbers of staff, larger numbers of student reps and so on are associated with a higher average score for unions in that category, with the biggest difference emerging in relation to student population size.

However, when the data are used to examine the relationship per student capita (for example, block grant divided by total number of students, or by

number of reps per 100 students), it is not clear that a greater resource is associated with a higher Q26 score. This highlights the need to think carefully about the relationship between student union expenditure and the impact on student perceptions.

Given the relationship seen above between awareness of union services and Q26 replication score, it is possible that the relationship suggested by Figure 7 is mediated by the visibility factor associated with being a bigger union at a bigger institution. Being big enough to offer a lot of different services with capacity to provide for a proportion of a large student population at any one time may reflect more positively on a union than a more limited offer with capacity to reach all students in a smaller population.



Note: Data ranges of categories are not contiguous because the data from which the categories have been derived are discontinuous.

### 'Representing academic interests': what do students expect unions to do?

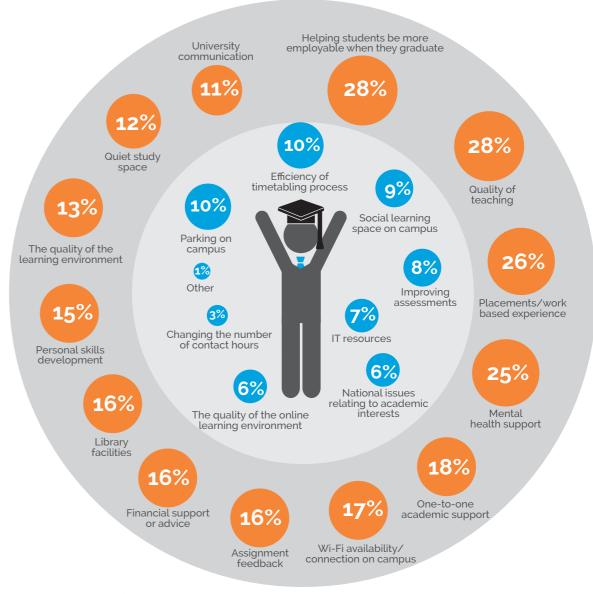
Students were asked to choose the three areas of activity they felt it was most important for their students' union to campaign for to represent their academic interests, selecting from a list of 22 areas. Figure 8 shows these areas of activity in descending order, corresponding to the proportion of respondents who selected them as one of their top three. The four areas of activity selected by the largest proportions of students were:

- Helping students be more employable when they graduate (28%)
- Quality of teaching (also 28%)

- Placements/work-based experience (26%)
- Mental health support (25%)

Three-quarters of respondents chose at least one of these four items as among the three areas of activity they consider to be most important for unions to campaign on. The activity that attracted the fifth-largest proportion of respondents, oneto-one academic support, was a considerably less popular choice than those shown above, with only 18% of students choosing it as one of their top three.

Figure 8: What unions should campaign on - percentage of students selecting activity as amongst their top three choices



Base: All respondents to the survey (17085)

Union Futures: The impact of NSS Q26

Analysis of the sample broken down by responses to Q26 - into three categories: 'disagree', 'neither agree nor disagree', 'agree' - finds that the same four areas of activity emerge as the most popular choices across all three response groups. The concentration of responses within these four areas would appear to recommend them as a fruitful avenue for impactful union campaigning in future.

Analysis examining responses according to whether the student was studying a 'traditional' or 'non-traditional'/vocational subject found further differences in terms of the likelihood of selecting an area of activity as one of the three they considered to be most important for union campaigning with regard to their academic interests. Students reading more 'traditional' subjects were more likely than students on 'non-traditional'/ vocational courses to choose the following as one of their top three priorities for union campaigning:

- IT resources
- Social learning space on campus
- Quiet study space
- Assignment feedback
- Quality of teaching

Students reading 'non-traditional'/ vocational subjects were more likely than students on 'traditional' courses to choose one of the following as amongst their top three:

- Parking on campus
- Financial support or advice
- University communication

<sup>6</sup> The union could introduce themselves and explain who they are and what they can do and what the procedure is when I want to bring up an issue ??

Female, 18-21, 1st year, Q26 response: 'Neither agree nor disagree'

The union should put in more effort to open a direct dialogue with students and advise them of the circumstances in which they're able to help; at the moment nobody views them as being approachable. 99

> Male, 18-21, 2nd year, Q26 response: 'disagree'

Focus group participants were asked to think about their university life so far, and to reflect on ways in which their students' union, guild or association could have helped to represent their academic interests during this period. The responses were grouped according to key themes, and encompassed the following:

- Make publicity and information about what the union can do and for whom clearer
- Gather and act on student suggestions and feedback
- Better represent and be inclusive of all students via societies, events and activities
- Help address the quality of teaching, learning materials and spaces
- Help improve assessment and feedback
- Provide support and guidance on employability
- Provide support and information on health and wellbeing issues

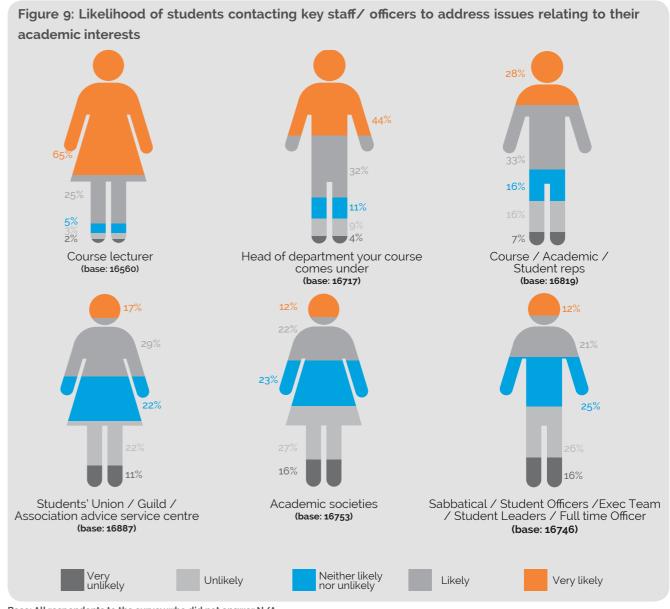
# 'Representing academic interests': where do students currently turn?

Students were asked how likely they would be to contact each of a number of key different points of contact or services within the university, if they had a question, issue or problem in relation to their academic interests. Figure 9 shows their responses.

If students have a question or problem relating to their academic interests they are overwhelmingly most likely to contact their course lecturer (90% likely or very likely), closely followed by their head of department (76% likely or very likely). Of the students' union services listed, respondents were most likely to contact their student reps (61%), followed by the advice centre (46%). These findings highlight the importance of student reps as an interface between students and their union, and suggest that the union itself is unlikely to be the first port of call in such matters, which in turn prompts reflection on how and where the union may fit in, and what this picture may say about the role of the relationship between the students' unions and academic staff.

I don't think I would contact the SU in any situation... I think lecturers know my problem much better than the SU.

> Male, 18-21, 2nd year, Q26 response: 'Definitely agree'



Base: All respondents to the survey who did not answer N/A

### Methodology

Our methodological approach to this study was underpinned by our desire to achieve a strong quantitative element supported by some qualitative research obtained through open survey questions and focus groups. We received 17,085 responses to the survey which was conducted online between 14 November and 12 December, 2016. with each participating union promoting it locally. 29 survey respondents from across the participating institutions took part in four online focus groups, which were held on 6 December, 2016. The survey included replication of the old NSS Q23 and the new Q26, plus the other questions in the Student Voice section of the NSS, as well as additional questions of interest to participating unions. The focus groups explored student understandings of the term 'academic interests', their cognitive processing of Q26, to whom or where they would turn to for academic support and advice, and what they think their union can do for them to help represent their academic interests.

The quantitative findings resulting from this survey sample were intended to be suggestive of the likely trajectory of change in union scores, rather than predictive of the final figures - the results of a survey based on a convenience sample inevitably deviate from a population-level survey, such as the NSS, and indeed the sample achieved in this study was found to be more engaged with the activities of their students' union than the student population as a whole. This may be one of the reasons why the resulting Q23 replication scores are several points higher than the 2016 NSS Q23 scores for most of the participating unions. Furthermore, this study has helped to shed light on the extent and nature of variability in student understandings of Q26, which make subsequent NSS scores inherently more difficult to predict than might otherwise have been the case. Taking account of both its limitations and strengths, this research has provided a sound basis for some detailed analysis of the impact of the NSS change, making it a very valuable source of insight for the sector and helping to inform its responses to the change.

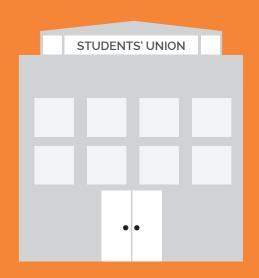


### Participating students' unions

The Q26 Impact Study brought together 18 students' unions as part of a joint research venture to inform and enable a proactive response to the new NSS question, under the rubric of Alterline's wider Union Futures programme. Our thanks go to Ben Vulliamy, chief executive of University of York Students' Union, for the pivotal role he played in successfully engaging the participating unions in a very short time. Those unions are:

- University of York Students' Union
- Anglia Ruskin University Students' Unior
- University of Northampton Students' Union
- Lancaster University Students' Union
- University of West London Students' Union
- Hertfordshire Students' Union
- Staffordshire University Students' Union
- Liverpool Students' Union
- University of Exeter Students' Guil

- Nottingham Trent Students' Union
- University of Bedfordshire Students' Union
- University of Sunderland Students' Union
- Aston Students' Union
- University of Lincoln Students' Unior
- Middlesex University Students' Union
- University of Rirmingham Guild of Student
- University of Manchester Students' Union
- University of East Anglia Students' Union





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