

## Durham SU

### Experiences of Student Role Holders



July 2025

## Key summary

### Introduction and method

In the 2024/2025 academic year, Alterline was commissioned to support Durham SU with the development and running of their student group volunteers survey. Durham SU had previously surveyed its student group, committee, club or society leaders to understand the accessibility of leadership opportunities and to gather feedback and evidence values, as well as quality, diversity and inclusion across student leadership roles. The new survey was developed by Alterline and Durham SU, so that students who contribute by volunteering can find the right place to feedback on their experiences.

This survey aimed to understand the enablers and barriers to access and success in the roles on campus held by student leaders and other role holders, and the value and achievement students experience from these roles.

The survey ran between 18<sup>th</sup> March and 7<sup>th</sup> July 2025. The survey received a total of 185 completed responses, demographic breakdowns of the sample can be [found here](#).

Quotes from open-ended comments are included in this report. While obvious spelling errors have been corrected for ease of reading, otherwise quotes are included as written by students and may contain spelling or grammatical errors.

### Role information

84% of students who took the survey volunteered through Durham Students' Union or a College Common Room. The most common roles were President and Officer, though there were a variety of other roles represented such as secretary and treasurer. 6% were in a sabbatical role. Typically speaking, students reported spending somewhere between 1 and 9 hours a week on their role.

### Overall experience

87% of students positively rated their experience as a role holder overall. They said they took a sense of enjoyment from doing the role, that it made them feel part of a community and meet others, helped to develop their skills, and meant that they were making a difference for other students and the wider community. This resulted in 94% of role holders saying that they would recommend their role to their peers.

Role holders did feel that their role could be stressful, particularly during busy periods and where they were asked to do more than expected. This meant they could find it difficult to balance their role against competing priorities. They also experienced difficulties managing interpersonal conflicts and working with others they perceived to be difficult.

## Application, selection and induction

The most common motivators was taking up students' role were to help other students, to contribute to how the group could improve, and to ensure the group could continue to exist.

Students were mixed about the advertisement itself, which may be linked to high proportions hearing about the role through word of mouth. While most agreed that their role was well advertised and that it helped them to understand their role, there was some disagreement with the former statement (17%). Students were also less sure about the fact that anyone was able to apply for the role, which may be linked to some students saying that their roles did have requirements which excluded some students.

The vast majority of students felt that the selection/election process was clear and that support was available if needed. Students appeared to already be familiar with the group they were seeking a role within, meaning they were familiar with the selection or election process. There were some isolated comments that this process was not well organised, unclear or confusing, but little further information provided to understand the areas specifically which contributed to that.

Perceptions of induction were again more mixed in nature. While the majority agreement that the process was clear, that it helped them to understand their role and that they could access support during the process, almost a quarter (23%) disagreed that the induction process was clear. The engagement of predecessors in the induction process appeared to be a key factor here, with positive perceptions stemming from comprehensive handovers from predecessors whereas negative perceptions stemmed from when this was rushed or non-existent.

## Resources, training and support

Generally speaking, students were satisfied with the space, funds and equipment they had to run activities. However, there were clear pockets of dissatisfaction here, particularly with the equipment. Students with disabilities were also much less likely to agree there was enough space (58%). Opinions on the financial process were mixed: 45% found this each and 33% found it difficult. Across different elements of the survey, comments were made about the financial process which indicated that students wanted better training and more support with this element.

55% of students said they had received some formal training for their role, and receipt of formal training was linked to higher levels of satisfaction with the role overall. Students who had received training were highly satisfied with it (80%). There were mixed opinions about whether training and support was ongoing through the year, however, as 29% of students disagreed that this was the case. Some students felt that there could be better advertisement of the training that is on offer.

## Impact

94% of students agreed that their contribution has made a positive difference to their student group. The vast majority also felt that they would achieve their goals this year (85%) and that they had achieved what they set out to do (80%). Financial constraints, time pressures, limited engagement in the group, and issues within the executive team were cited as barriers to achieving students' goals for the group.

A warm-toned photograph of a person's hands writing in a notebook on a wooden table. A white cup of coffee sits on a saucer in the foreground, and a dark bag is visible in the background against a brick wall.

# Role information

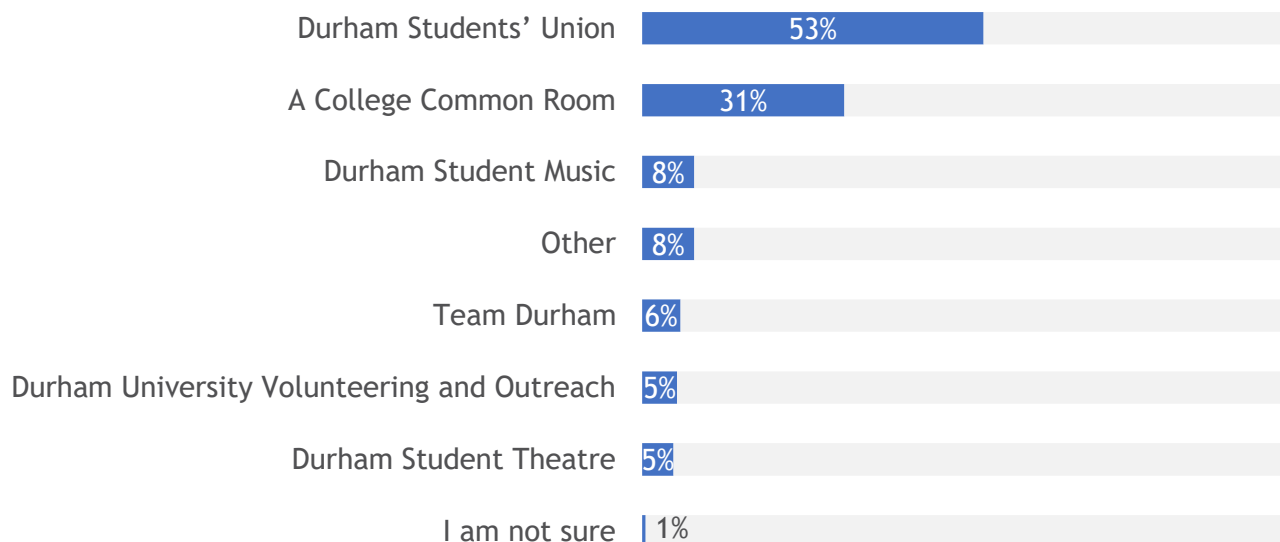
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## Role information

Durham Students' Union was the organisation that students most frequently reported as hosting their club or group, with 53% reporting that they are hosted by the SU. This was followed by a College Common Room, which 31% of respondents indicated their group was hosted by.

### Organisation that hosts role holders' club, group or committee.

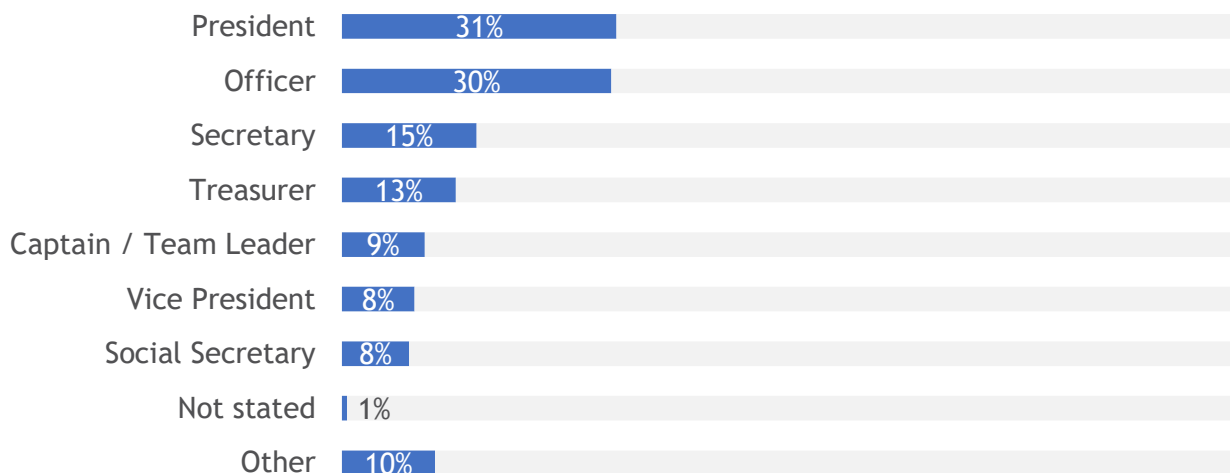
Base: All respondents (185)

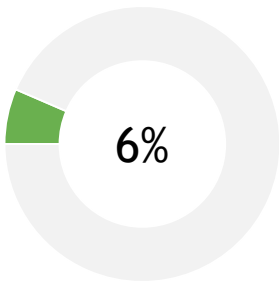


Just under a third (31%) of respondents indicated that their role is as a President of the club or society. This was followed by the position of Officer, which 30% of students reported to be their role. Roles within the 'other' category included roles such as music director, writer, journalist, and trustee.

### Role held by students in the survey.

Base: All respondents, excluding sabbatical officers (173)





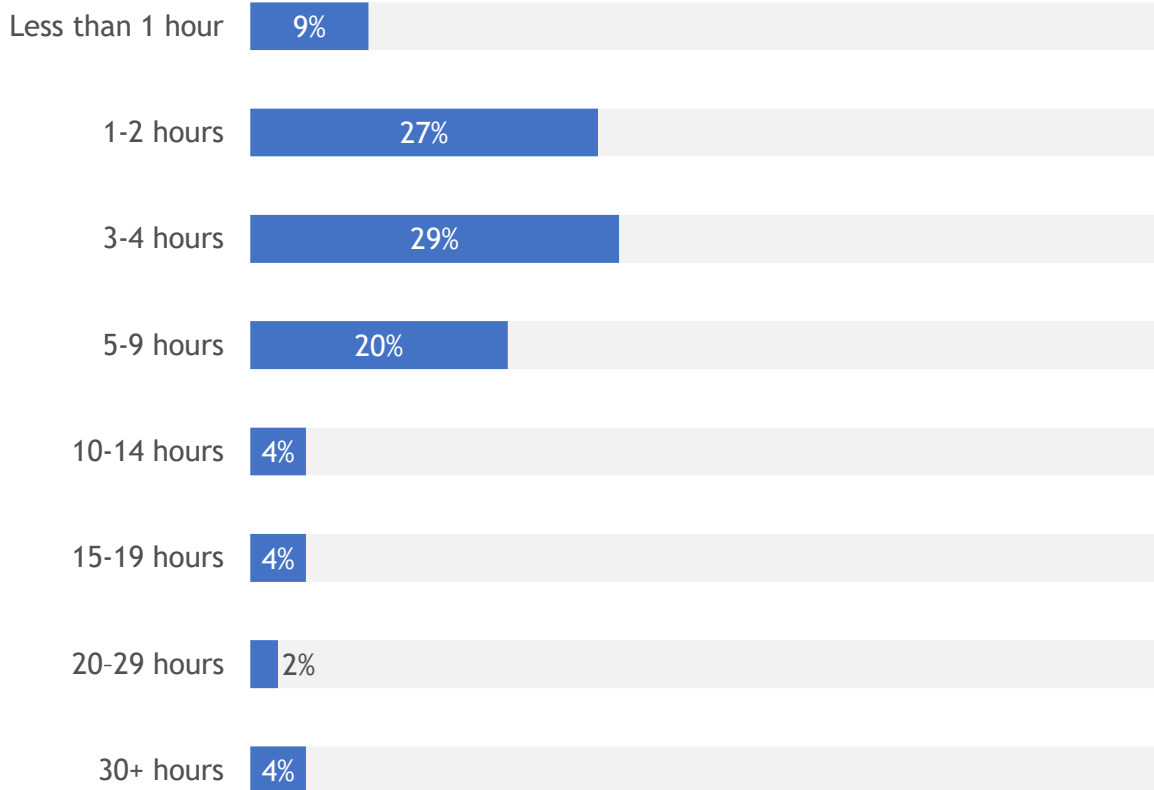
Overall, 94% of students indicated that their role was not a sabbatical position, and 6% reported that it was.

Are in a sabbatical role

The most common amounts of time that students reported spending on their role each week were between 1 and 2 hours (27%), and 3-4 hours (29%), meaning that 56% of students spent this amount of time on their role. Overall, 14% indicated that they spend 10 or more hours on their role each week.

#### Amount of time students reported spending on their role each week.

Base: All respondents (185)



Students who are presidents or vice presidents were more likely to report doing 5 or more hours in a week (44%), as well as students who were captains or team leaders (63%).



A warm, orange-toned photograph of a person's hands writing in a small notebook on a wooden table. A white coffee cup sits on a saucer in the foreground, and a dark bag is visible in the background against a brick wall.

Overall experience

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## Overall experience

Experiences of being a student role holder were largely positive, with 87% of students indicating that their experience had been either very good or good. Students who are UK citizens were more likely to report that their experience had been very good (54%) than good (34%), while a greater proportion of international students indicated that their experience was good (53%) as opposed to very good (33%).

How students would rate their experience of being a role holder.

Base: All respondents (185)



Very good Good Neutral Poor Very poor

Features of the role that students enjoyed included:



### Enjoyment

When describing why they had rated their experience, enjoyment of aspects of the role was the most frequently mentioned reason given. A sense of enjoyment was linked to specific activities that the role involves, the social dynamics of the role, impact, and skills development.

“

I have enjoyed planning events for the society which have been successful. It has been fun to watch the society develop over the year.



### Community and social connections

Students mentioned that the role had helped them to feel part of a community, and that it had enhanced their social opportunities, allowing them to make new friends and connect through shared interests.

“

It's allowed me to meet so many new people and develop my skills and confidence.



### Skills development

It was additionally mentioned that roles had helped students to develop skills outside of their studies. Skills mentioned included organisation, leadership, time management, communication and financial skills.

“

It's been a lot of fun and helped me to improve my confidence and develop my leadership and organisational skills.





### Social interaction and community

Role holders mentioned being able to meet other like-minded people, form close connections with others, and develop a sense of community with their peers. This seemed to be particularly the case for members of executive teams, and role holders in these positions mentioned close bonds with other executive team members.

“

I enjoy contributing towards the local community and environment, and I enjoyed meeting likeminded people I would never otherwise have met.



### Event organisation and planning

Students mentioned finding the organisation of events rewarding, from enjoyment of the process itself and also in seeing and hearing about the impact of events on other students.

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I greatly enjoy being in charge of events. The satisfaction gained from organising, then running an event, and hearing feedback from attendees is very enjoyable.



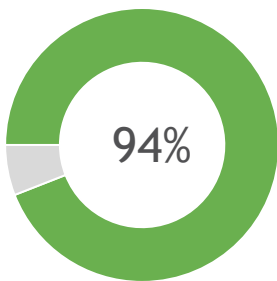
### Having an impact

Students discussed feeling as though their work is making a difference for others and effecting real change for younger years, for other students, and for the wider community.

“

I enjoying working with the rest of the committee members and feeling as though we're making a tangible difference to college life.

Other factors included the impact and contribution being made and the dynamics of working with the executive team. Reasons students gave have having a positive experience were often multifaceted, with many students mentioning two or three of these factors in their explanation for their experience.



Students' overall positive perceptions of the role is further reflected in the fact that 94% of those responding to the survey would recommend their role to other students.

would recommend their role to  
their peers

Aspects of the role students did not enjoy included:



### **Stress and pressure of responsibility**

When discussing what they did not enjoy about their role, the most frequently mentioned aspect was the stress and pressure that having the role entailed. Feeling pressure in a role could come from different areas, including at busy times, when additional tasks were put on students outside of their role, and when students were conscious of the expectations that others had of them.

“

Sometimes too much responsibility was put onto me by student leaders higher up. I was asked to do things I wasn't supposed to be doing which was sometimes a bit much.



### **Time pressures and competing priorities**

Students discussed the time demands of having a role and mentioned that this could be hard to balance against other responsibilities they had, such as academic deadlines.

“

Sometimes the tasks I have to do every single day can become less fun during times with many deadlines.



### **Interpersonal conflicts/difficult dynamics**

Managing interpersonal dynamics between other members and others on the executive team was raised as something that role holders could find stressful, and others being ungrateful, not putting in effort, and being difficult to work with were discussed.

“

I found it hard to balance being friends with people and also telling them what is unacceptable behaviour, especially when I know they are struggling with their mental health. I have found it difficult when one of my exec members has for example said they will do something/ want to do it but then don't reply to any of my messages and don't turn up to rehearsals so I cannot contact them.

It was additionally raised that managing finances, dealing with bureaucracy, and university policies could all cause students' difficulties within their roles and mar their enjoyment of them.

# Application, selection and induction

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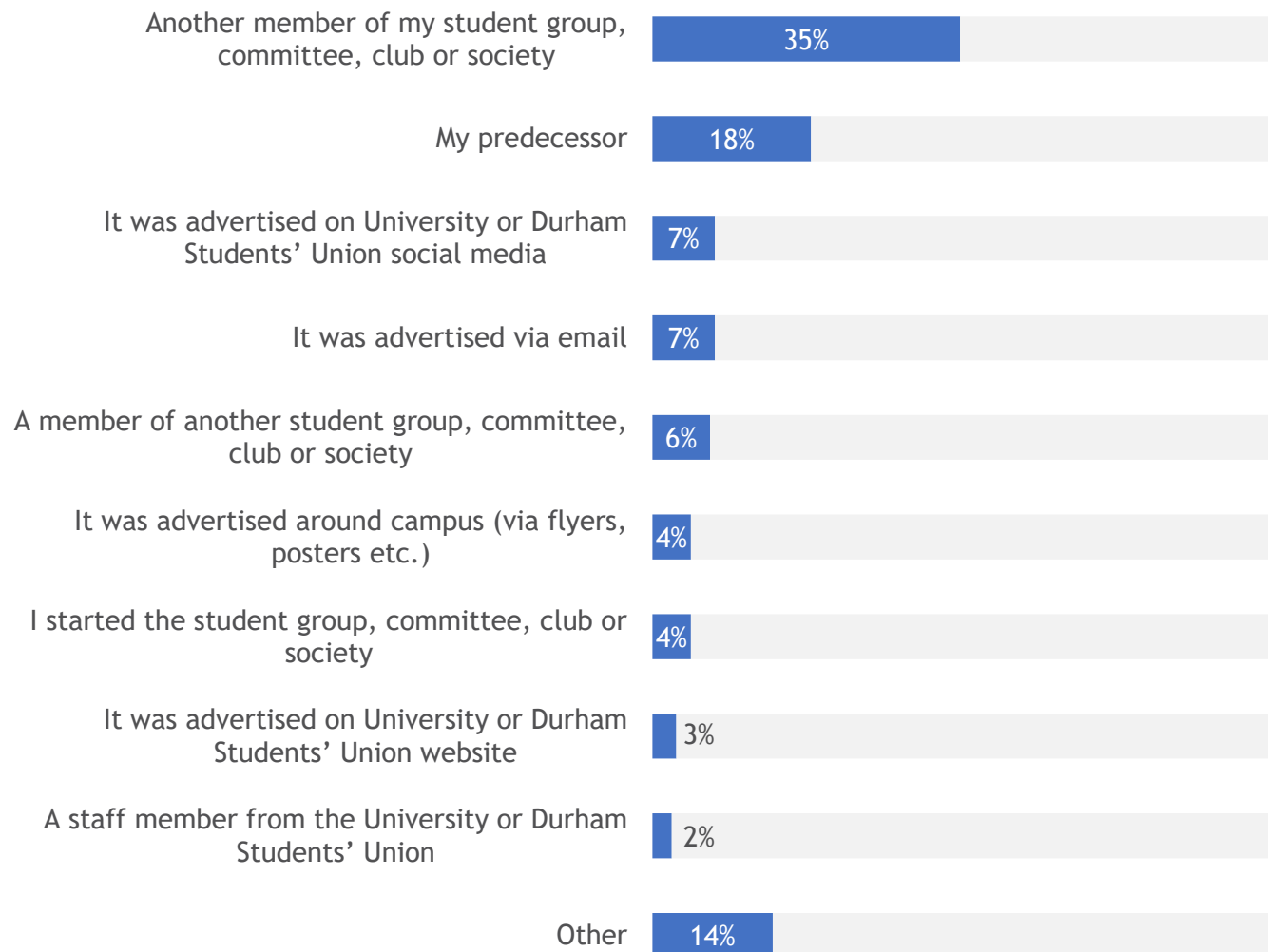
## Application and selection

Over half of students indicated that they had found out about their role through either another member of their group, club or society (35%), or a predecessor (18%). The prevalence of word of mouth as a way of finding out about the role may explain why attitudes towards the advertisement of the role were more mixed.

Small numbers of students mentioned that they had seen the role advertised, either through email (7%), around campus (4%), or on the Students' Union's website (3%). International students were more likely to report that they found out about the role from it being advertised around campus (10%, compared to 3% of those from the UK).

### How students found about their role.

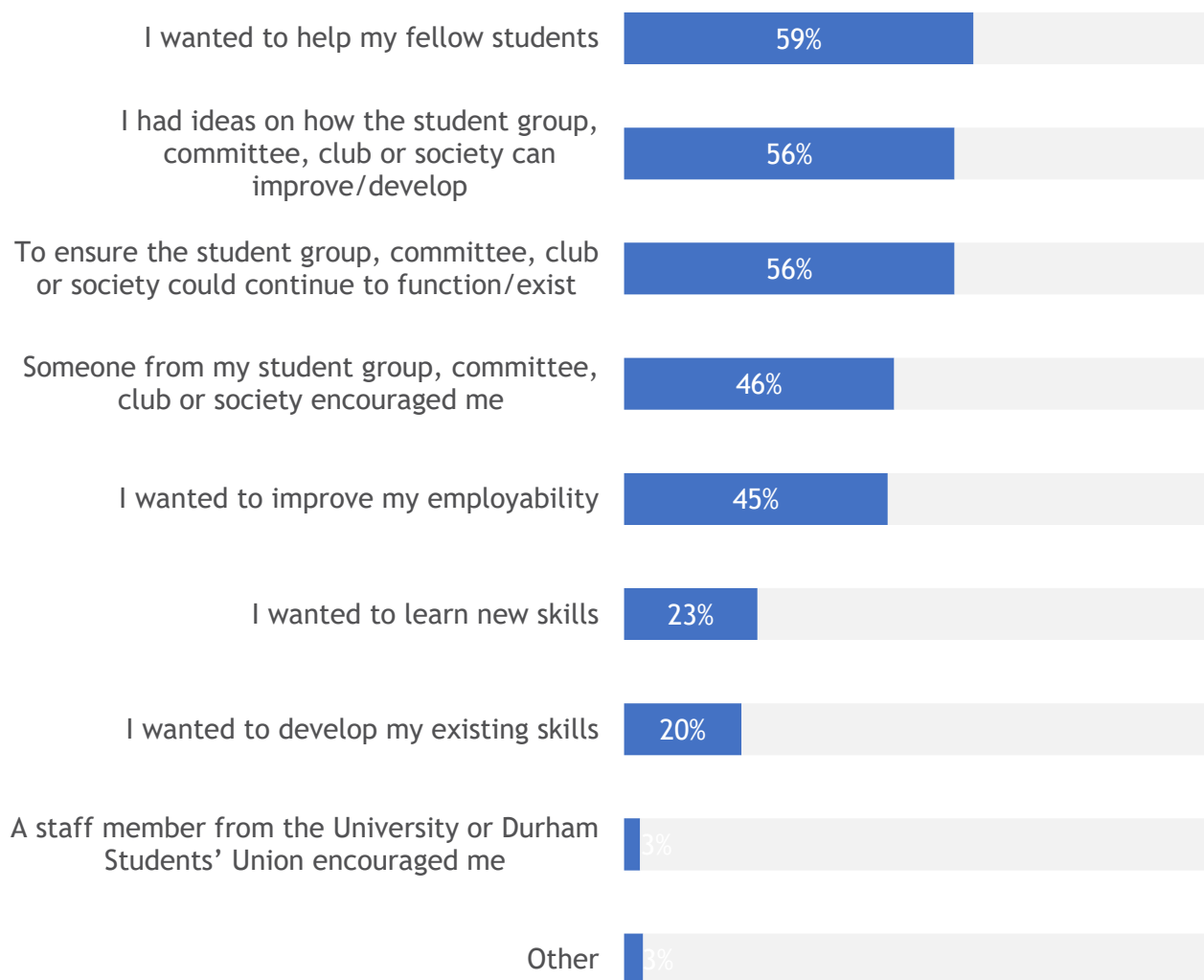
Base: All respondents (185)



Wanting to help fellow students (59%), contribute ideas on how the group could improve (56%), and ensuring that the student group could continue to function (56%) were the top motivations for students taking on a role. In line with findings that students most often found out about their role through word of mouth, encouragement from others was also an important motivator (46%). Interestingly, improving students' employability generally (45%) was substantially more of a motivator than learning new skills (23%) or develop existing ones (20%) specifically.

#### What motivated students to start their role.

Base: All respondents (185)



Students from the UK were more likely to report that they took up their role to ensure that the club or society could continue to function (61% compared to 40% of international students). Additionally, lower proportions of those who spent 2 or fewer hours on their role a week selected that they had ideas about running the group compared to those who spend 5 or more hours on their role (42% compared to 72%) and that they wanted to develop existing skills (10% compared to 32%). These motivators did not significantly based on the respondents' role.

Just under three quarters of students agreed that the advertisement helped them understand their role (74%) and that anyone was able to apply to the role (72%). Just over two thirds agreed that the role was well advertised (66%). Two students in the open-ended comments referenced that their role, in fact, was not open to everyone which may explain some of the disagreement with this statement and may indicate the need to revise the question in future surveys.

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Only certain people could run for this role because it requires specific qualifications that are essential for the tasks undertaken by the elected individual, it was in no way discouraging people from running who met the requirements.

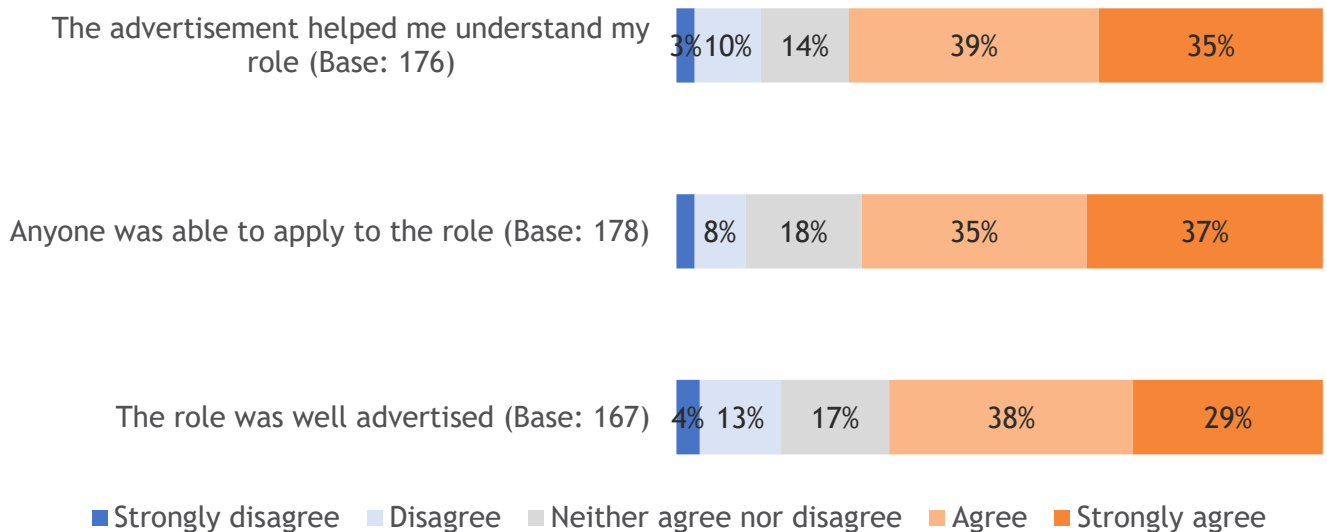
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This role is unlike other student societies - not anyone can apply because of the confidential nature but amongst those who can it was well and fairly advertised.

Those who don't work alongside their studies were more likely to agree that anyone was able to apply to role and that the role was well advertised than those employed or self-employed (79% and 73% respectively compared to 61% and 59%). This could suggest that there may be room for improvement in advertising roles to students who are employed and ensuring that applying is accessible to them.

#### Level of agreement with statements about the advertisement and availability of roles in the selection/election process.

Base: All respondents, excluding 'Not applicable' (varies)



Only two students made comments about the advertisement. One was simply to say it should have been advertised better. The other said that a number of responsibilities that were part of their role had not been mentioned in the advertisement for it.

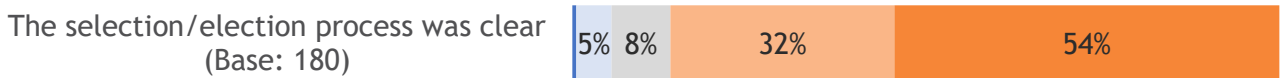
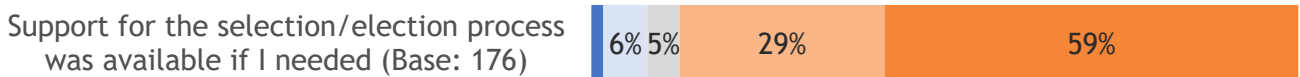


The vast majority of respondents in the survey had been selected via election process, with 80% indicating that they had been selected in this way, 17% via appointment and 3% through another selection method.

Sentiment was again largely positive about the support for and clarity of the election process, with 88% of students agreeing that support was available to them if they needed it and 86% felt that the selection or election process was clear. Students whose role was President or Vice President were less likely to agree that support for the selection/election process was available (80%) than students in other roles.

#### Level of agreement with statements about the election process

Base: All respondents, excluding 'Not applicable' (varies)



■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Students who commented positively about the election/selection process said that they were familiar with it because they had been part of the society before so they had seen it or that it wasn't formal because they already had close relationships as a group. One person noted that the application process had been restructured which had mitigated against problems the group had previously. One person noted that they liked that the hustings were recorded during the AGM for those who couldn't attend.

Comments indicated that some had an issue with College elections, with one commenting that they are *'rarely well organised'* and another saying that the election process wasn't well explained in the JCR's communications which resulted in them making a mistake.

“

The election process wasn't explained very well in the JCR's emails/social media/standing orders, so I ended up making a mistake with who seconded/proposed me for election, which generated problems.

One student felt that the SU's website promoting applications was *'really not clear and very glitchy'*.

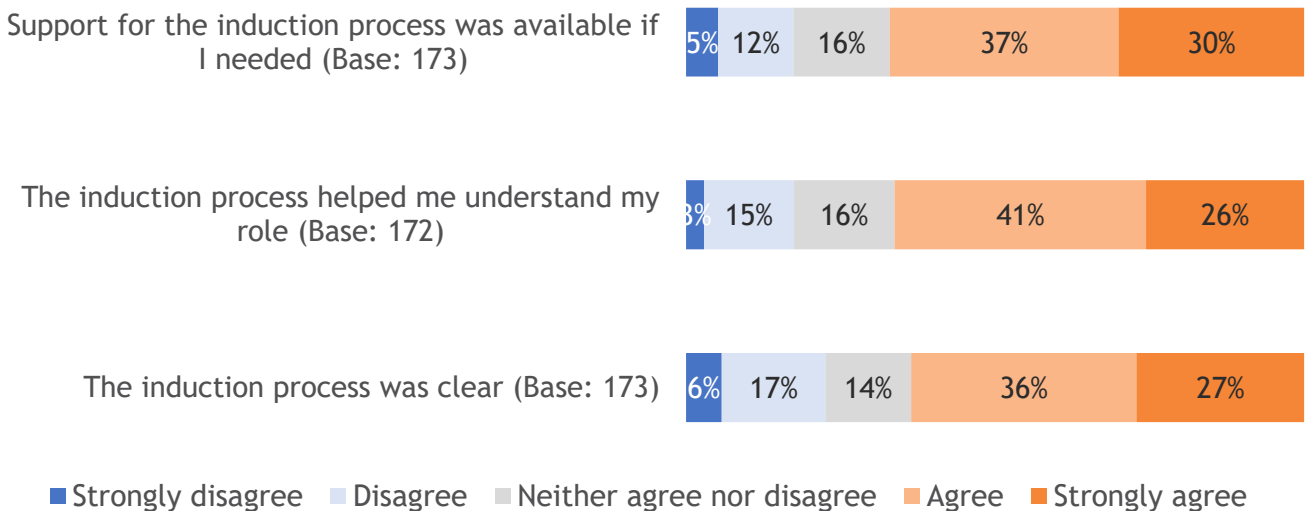
One student mentioned that they found the process of running for the role confusing and that they had had to navigate it on their own, but they were aware of drop-in sessions that could have accessed to support with this.

## The induction process

Most participants were positive about the induction process. 67% felt that there was support available if they needed it, 67% said it helped them to understand their role, and 63% said the process was clear. While this indicates that the majority of students feel positively about their induction, there was a fairly substantial group of students who feel less positively about this aspect of starting their role. 23% disagreed that the induction process was clear and almost one in five disagreed that support was available if they needed it (18%) or that it helped them to understand their role (18%). There weren't significant differences across groups in levels of agreement for statements about the induction process.

### Level of agreement with statements about the induction process

Base: All respondents, excluding 'Not applicable' (varies)



The comments about the induction process were equally mixed. Some students said that their predecessor had done a good job providing them with the information that they needed for the role, whereas others said their predecessor rushed this element or did not do it at all.

“

Unfortunately due to recent revival, limited induction materials for my role existed, but my predecessor gave as much information as possible, and remained on the exec which was extremely helpful in maintaining continuity and high standards for leadership.

“

I got a very bad handover for one of my roles - literally just 5 minutes with my predecessor.

“

Our President is very busy and the other Exec members graduated the year I came into the role, so I mostly formed the role myself.

The success of the handover appeared to be linked to the engagement of the person previously in the role. One student mentioned that they had taken steps to improve the induction process for their student group to counter issues from previous years.

“

Because the induction process was a bit unclear last year, and the exec in general wasn't too organised, as a new exec we have already taken steps to ensure the new exec members have a proper exec handover (e.g. each of us made a detailed handover document to guide them, including tutorials for how to do things, what a weekly schedule would look like, and much more).

Some students referenced that the actual induction itself was brief and noted that they wanted more help from the Students' Union particularly around the financial side.

“

The induction process was very brief and not particularly detailed - rather I'd later send questions to previous execs to answer (for both societies).

“

The student finance app took some getting used to even with the videos but wasn't difficult once I'd set it up to use.

## Resources, training and support

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## Resources and funding

Three quarters of role holders reported that they had enough space and funds. Equipment was the resource that fewest role holders agreed they had enough of. While the majority (68%) of respondents did agree that they had enough equipment to run activities for students, just under a quarter of participants disagreed.

Students who have a disability were less likely to agree that their club or society has enough space than those without a disability (58% compared to 81%). Those who don't work during term time were more likely to agree that their group had enough equipment compared to those who are employed or work freelance (74% compared to 59%).

### Level of agreement amongst role holders that their club or society has enough of the resource to run activities for students.

Base: All respondents, excluding 'Not applicable' (varies)

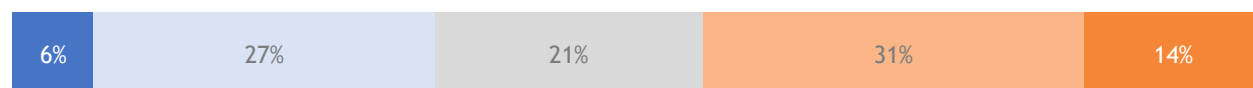


■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Opinions on the ease of financial processes were mixed. A third of student role holders reported that they found the finances process to be difficult, and 45% reported that they found it to be easy. International students were more likely to report that they found the finance process very difficult as compared to students from the UK (18% compared to 3%).

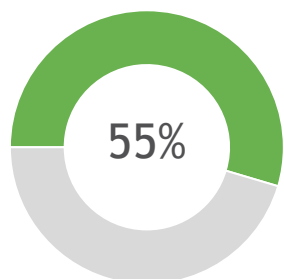
### Level of reported difficulty of the finance process.

Base: All respondents, excluding 'Not applicable' (154)



■ Very difficult ■ Difficult ■ Neither easy nor difficult ■ Easy ■ Very easy

## Training

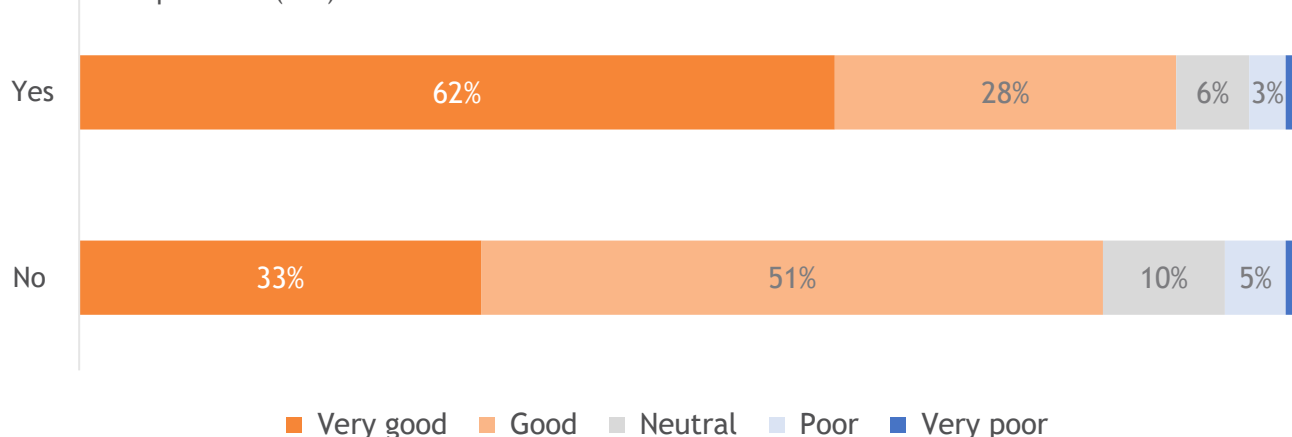


have received formal training for their role

Just over half of the role holders surveyed reported that they had received formal training for their role. Second year undergraduate students were more likely to report that they hadn't received formal training (64%) than students in other year groups.

It appears that receiving formal training may be connected to overall experience of the role. Students who had received formal training were more likely to indicate that their overall experience had been very good (62%), whereas those who had not received any training were more likely to rate their experiences as simply good (51%), compared to students that hadn't received formal training. Students who hadn't received formal training still reported that they enjoyed their role so it doesn't appear to be a factor that undermines their overall experience but training does appear to enhance it.

How students would rate their overall experience by whether they had received formal training or not.  
Base: All respondents (185)



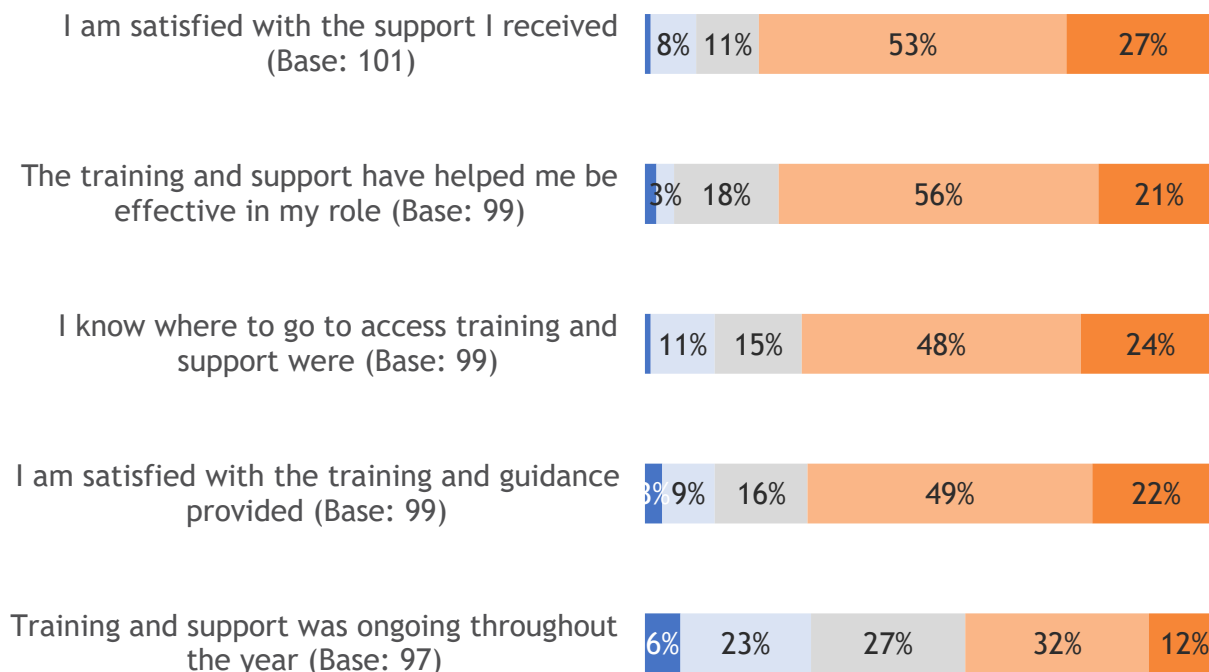
Overall, 80% of students reported that they were satisfied with the support they received. There were fairly high levels of agreement consistently for statements relating to the support that role holders had received, with the exception of training and support being ongoing throughout the year, which only 44% of students agreed with. The availability of training and support throughout the year may not be an essential requirement for all students, as 72% of those that disagreed that support and training had been ongoing were satisfied with the support they had received. However, 93% of those that had received ongoing support indicated that they were satisfied so this is linked with higher levels of satisfaction.

Students with a disability were less likely to know where to go to access training and support. Half of students in this group agreed with this, compared to 79% of students without a disability.



### Level of agreement with statements about training and support.

Base: Respondents who received formal training or informal support, excluding 'Not applicable' (varies)



■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

Communication of the available training appeared to be an area for improvement. One student said they had not received any and another felt that there had not been enough. One student felt that this was because the training was not well advertised.

“

I know who to go to if I need help with anything, but I do not believe I received enough training. Since my role requires me to set up/take down a lot of musical equipment, I think training in putting everything up would have been very helpful instead of leaving me and any volunteers to figure out (for example, how to set up a drum kit).

“

Tech training is poorly advertised to colleges. Only support was a H&S course by DST, which was good but basic. Apparently more were advertised but were not passed on to me.

Financial training was also a sticking point, and students wanted more on this. One student mentioned that timings of the training delivery negatively impacted its usefulness.

“

Historically I've done the SU finance training and found it not particularly helpful as the handover from my predecessor was more comprehensive and the dates for the training during exam season were awkward meaning I'd already done a term of the role by the time I received training.

Impact

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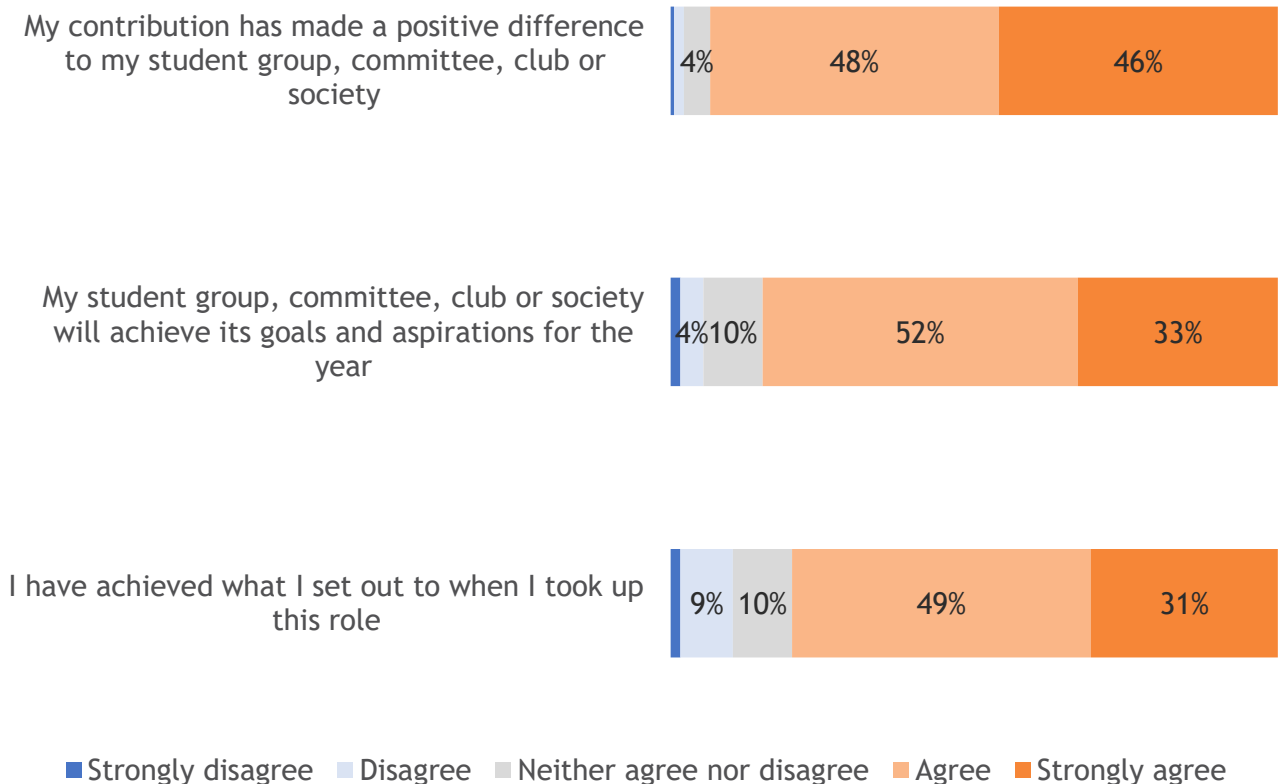


## Impact

Nearly all students felt that their contribution has made a positive difference to their group, club or society, with 94% agreeing that this is the case. Slightly lower, but still high, proportions of students felt that their group's goals would be achieved (85%) and that they had achieved what they set out to (80%).

### Level of agreement with statements about personal contribution and goals.

Base: All respondents (185)



Feeling that their contribution had made a positive difference to their student group is associated with having received formal training. Among those who reported that they had received formal training, 97% felt that their contribution had made a positive difference, compared to 89% of those that hadn't. Therefore, while receiving training is not necessarily a prerequisite for making a difference, it may help some to have a positive impact within their role.

Unsurprisingly, feeling that they had achieved what they had set out to within their role was also linked with overall perceptions. While 95% of those who said that their experience is very good say that they have achieved what they set out to, this dropped to 72% of those who would describe their experience as simply good, suggesting this may be an enhancing factor.

When describing what was holding students back from achieving their goals, funding was mentioned most frequently, with just over a third of students mentioning this. Overall, four factors emerged most prominently:



#### Funding limitations and financial constraints (35%)

“

We are a small society and rely on JCR funds so we can't always undertake larger projects.



#### Time limitations and pressures (19%)

“

Time it takes to communicate with University staff to enact certain actions.



#### Low engagement (18%)

“

Unmotivated committee members, shrinking member's engagement.



#### Issues with executive team members (16%)

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Sometimes, a lack of communication between exec members.

Other factors mentioned included a lack of physical space or access to facilities, bureaucracy and complicated processes, and health and wellbeing concerns.

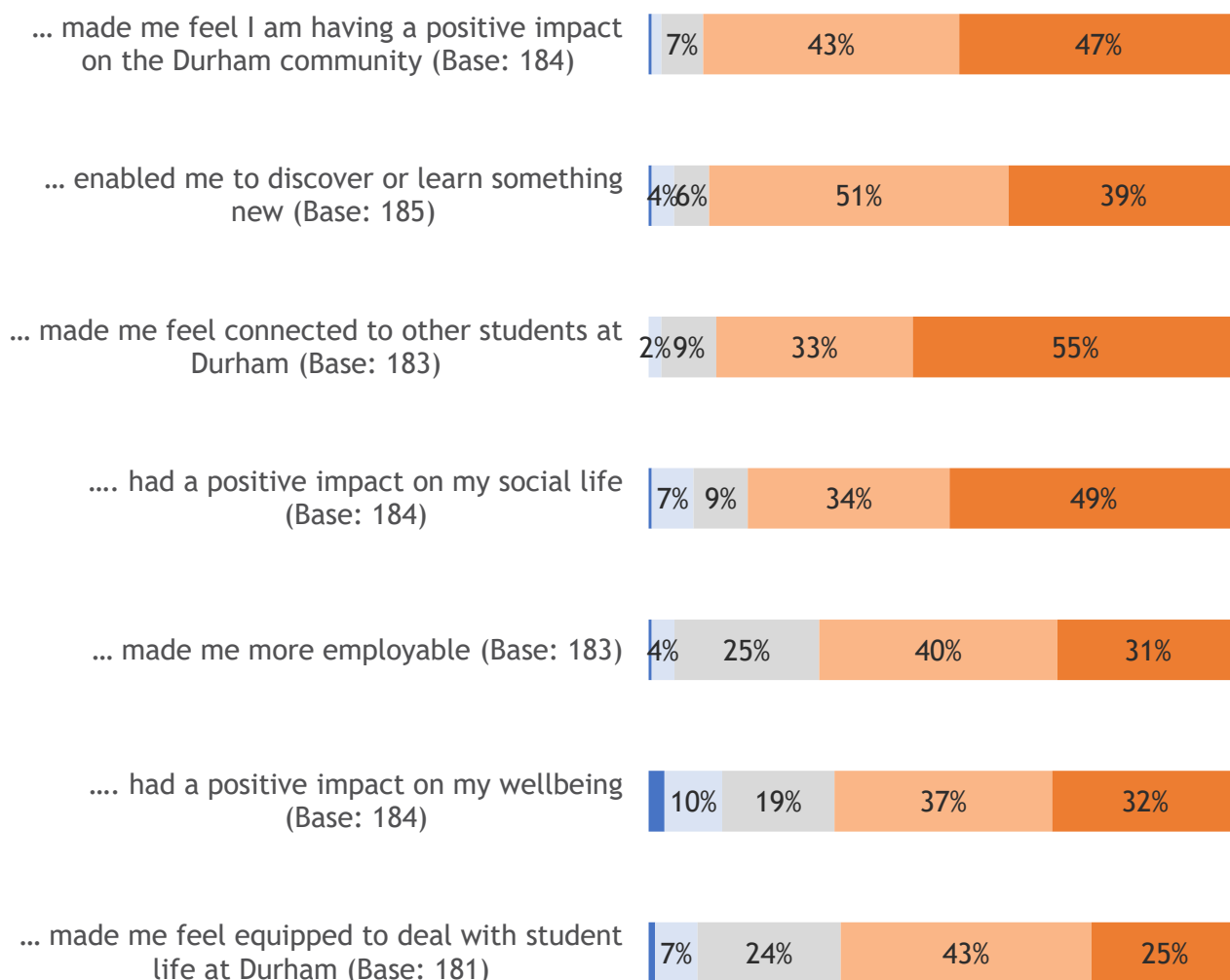


There was widespread agreement relating to the personal impact of being a role holder. Overall, 9 in 10 students report that their role made them feel as though they are having a positive impact on the Durham community and enabled them to learn or discover something new. There was also high agreement that their role had made them feel connected to other students (88%) and had a positive impact on their social life (83%).

Where there are lower levels of agreement, this is typically because students neither agree nor disagree with statements, rather than disagree. This is the case for students feeling that their role has made them feel equipped to deal with student life (68%), had a positive impact on their wellbeing (69%) and that it has made them more employable (71%).

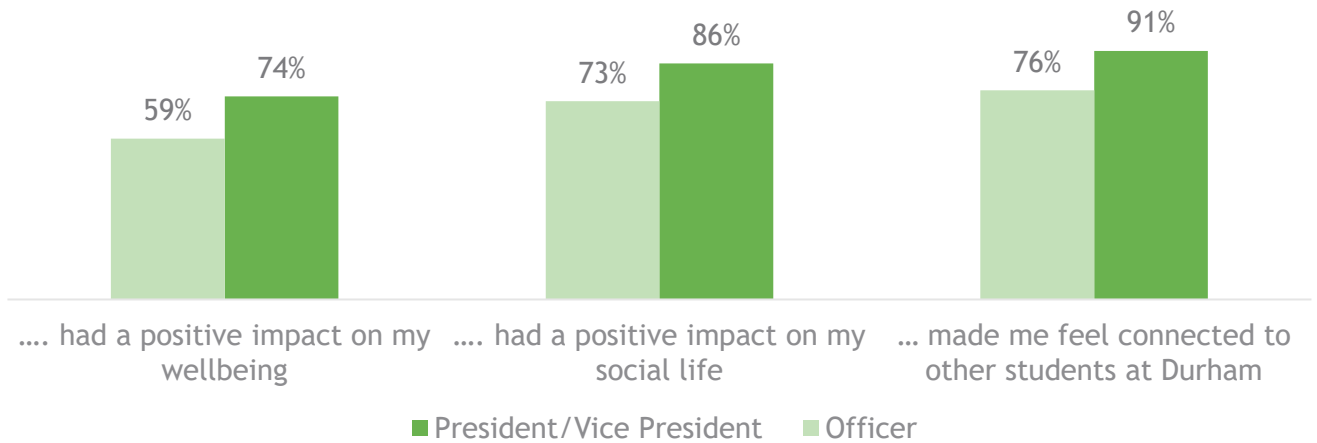
#### Level of agreement that their time contributing to their student group, committee, club or society role has .....

Base: All respondents, excluding 'Not applicable' (varies)



■ Strongly disagree ■ Disagree ■ Neither agree nor disagree ■ Agree ■ Strongly agree

A lower proportion of students whose role was as an officer felt that their role had had an impact on their wellbeing, social life, and connection to other students than those in a president or vice president role.



This connects with findings from earlier in the report, when students described what they enjoyed about their role. In this it was highlighted explicitly that the role of president is social in nature.

“

I particularly enjoy organising socials and connecting our members. Being president has been a very social role and I've enjoyed meeting new people.

Further, one respondent mentioned that these social opportunities differ for students based on the position they hold within the group.

“

I enjoy the tight group that forms within the official exec team. However, being assistant to an officer does not give you this, as you are not invited to meetings and likely don't know the other assisting members.

There may be scope to enhance the social opportunities across different roles to ensure that students taking on different responsibilities are still able to benefit from these positive personal impacts that holding a role can have.



## Sample demographics

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## Sample demographics

### Nationality

	%	Count
I am a UK citizen studying in the UK.	78%	145
Non-UK	22%	40
Total	100%	185

### Does gender identity match that assigned at birth

	%	Count
Yes	90%	166
No	5%	10
Prefer not to say	5%	9
Total	100%	185

### Year of study

	%	Count
Foundation / 1st	10%	18
I'm a 2nd year at undergraduate	29%	53
I'm a 3rd year undergraduate	36%	67
I'm a 4th year undergraduate	15%	28
Postgraduate	10%	19
Total	100%	185

### Sexual orientation

	%	Count
Heterosexual (or "Straight")	52%	96
Gay/lesbian (or "Homosexual")	5%	10
Bisexual	18%	34
Queer	5%	9
Pansexual	2%	4
Asexual	5%	9
I prefer to self-describe	1%	1
Prefer not to say	12%	22
Total	100%	185

### Gender

	%	Count
Man (including transgender man)	30%	55
Woman (including transgender women)	62%	114
Non-binary + Gender Fluid	4%	8
Prefer not to say	4%	8
Total	100%	185

### Term time work

	%	Count
I work during term time	29%	53
I am self-employed/work freelance during term-time	11%	21
I don't work during term time	60%	111
Total	100%	185

## Ethnicity

	%	Count
Arab	1%	1
Asian or Asian British – Chinese	8%	15
Asian or Asian British – Indian	4%	8
Asian or Asian British – Pakistani	1%	1
Any other Asian / Asian British background	2%	3
Black/African/Caribbean/Black British – African	2%	3
Jewish	1%	2
Latin/South/Central American	1%	2
Mixed / multiple ethnic – White and black Caribbean	1%	1
Any other mixed / multiple ethnic background	3%	6
White – British	46%	86
White – English	14%	25
White – Northern Irish	2%	3
White – Scottish	1%	2
White – Welsh	2%	4
Any other white background	6%	12
Any other ethnic group	2%	4
Prefer not to say	4%	7
Total	100%	185

## Receive Durham Grant

	%	Count
Yes	18%	33
No	77%	142
Prefer not to say	4%	8
Don't know	1%	2
Total	100%	185

## Disability

	%	Count
Yes	20%	37
No	70%	129
Prefer not to say	9%	16
Don't know	2%	3
Total	100%	185

## Relationship with parents

	%	Count
Estranged from parents	2%	3
Not estranged from parents	93%	172
Prefer not to say	5%	10
Don't know	0%	0
Total	100%	185

## First generation

	%	Count
Yes	17%	31
No	78%	145
Prefer not to say	4%	7
Don't know	1%	2
Total	100%	185

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