

Students' Union Risk & Change Readiness

A strategic response to sector challenges and the future sustainability of higher education

Executive Summary

Students' unions are operating in a period of significant financial pressure, institutional change and growing interest in collaboration across higher education. This work was initiated to understand how prepared unions are to respond to that environment and what support would help them engage early, protect student voice and make informed strategic choices.

Although mergers provided the original context, the consultation has reinforced the need for a broader strategic-readiness approach covering collaboration, shared services, structural change and other potential institutional developments that can directly impact on the students' union. The 52 consultation responses show a sector that is alert to change but unevenly prepared for it. Many unions are thinking strategically about their future, yet involvement in institutional discussions is inconsistent, formal risk assessment is limited, and time, capacity and clarity remain significant barriers.

Respondents expressed strongest interest in practical tools, sector intelligence, case studies and opportunities for peer learning. The findings point towards a proportionate and flexible offer that helps unions anticipate change and shape it, rather than prescribing a particular structural outcome. The next phase should remain sector-led, with the open, informal students' union group determining the direction, governance and priorities of the work. Coole Insight and Greenhouse will work collaboratively to convene the sector, coordinate delivery, and support the development of the readiness methodology and organisational-change approach. The role of Howden will be to contribute specialist risk expertise and potential enabling support, subject to clear safeguards protecting independence and confidentiality.

The work should also take note and connect with UUK's collaboration and transformation programme, any relevant historical work (for example Phil Gilks, SU CEO's practical experience of students' union merger and associated work with Advance HE), while maintaining the contact already established with NUS.

The recommended next steps and actions will be underpinned by co-design, and the need to test a practical readiness framework before deciding whether and how it should be developed at greater scale, which would require opportunity profiles for more sector professionals to take ownership of the work, and provide support and capacity for any future delivery.

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1. Introduction & Background

- 1.1 The starting point for this work was Steve Coole's Wonkhe article, [*We are merging. What do the students think?*](#), published on 29th September 2025 in response to the proposed multi-university group involving the Universities of Kent and Greenwich. Drawing on Steve's experience as a students' union officer during the cross-county merger that created the University for the Creative Arts, the article challenged the tendency for student voice to be considered only after strategic, financial and structural decisions have already begun to take shape.
- 1.2 It highlighted the importance of protecting students' academic identity, continuity of experience, access to services and sense of belonging, while ensuring that students' unions have a meaningful role in shaping change rather than simply communicating decisions made elsewhere. The article also raised a wider question. If mergers, partnerships and other forms of institutional collaboration were becoming more likely, how prepared were students' unions to respond? The concern was not limited to the impact of a single proposed merger. It was about whether unions across the sector had the information, relationships, governance arrangements and organisational capacity needed to recognise significant change early, represent students effectively and influence what happened next.
- 1.3 This question was explored further through an initial discussion with a small group of experienced students' union chief executives and sector leaders on 23rd March 2026, followed by further discussion and agreed actions on 24th March. Participants described a sector in which universities were increasingly considering mergers, partnerships, restructuring and shared approaches in response to financial and strategic pressures. However, these conversations were often confidential, and students' unions were frequently involved only after options had narrowed or decisions were already well developed.
- 1.4 The group agreed that unions needed to become better prepared to identify early signals, test different scenarios and engage their boards before change became urgent. The discussion also widened the focus beyond formal mergers. Participants distinguished between changes largely driven by universities and more proactive forms of collaboration that students' unions could initiate themselves. These could include joint projects, shared services, collective procurement, shared infrastructure or deeper strategic partnerships.
- 1.5 While collaboration offered opportunities, the group identified barriers including limited leadership capacity, organisational independence, unequal power and resources, institutional competition, cultural differences and the absence of practical frameworks showing how to begin. It became clear that the work needed to address both risk and opportunity, and to help unions prepare for externally driven change while also enabling them to consider collaboration intentionally and on their own terms.
- 1.6 Following these discussions, Greenhouse and Coole Insight produced an initial readiness outline on 13th April 2026. This proposed a light-touch

diagnostic through which students' unions could consider their governance and decision-making, approach to risk, relationship with their university, organisational capacity, leadership, people and culture. The intention was not to create a merger checklist, but to help boards and senior leadership teams ask better questions, identify areas of vulnerability and consider different future scenarios before they were required to respond under pressure.

- 1.7 The case for this work was further developed by Ben Vulliamy, Executive Director of the Association of Heads of University Administration (AHUA) in his Wonkhe article, [*Hard questions for SU boards in an era of structural decline*](#), published on 22nd April 2026. Drawing on an analysis of the published accounts of 37 English students' unions, Ben highlighted increasing deficits, falling income and a widening gap in financial resilience across the sector. His article moved the conversation beyond responding to individual mergers and towards the deeper governance questions facing students' union boards.
- 1.8 This included business continuity during institutional change, the potential for shared services and collaboration, the resilience of existing strategies under financial constraint, the need to reset relationships with universities, and whether reserves policies and risk appetites remained appropriate. This reinforced the emerging view that structural change and sustainability needed to be treated as board-level issues and that unions should explore their options before financial or institutional pressures removed their ability to choose.
- 1.9 On 23rd April, Coole Insight began exploring how Howden could support the work through its risk expertise and its high interest and long-standing commitment and partnership with the SU sector. Initial options included board-level governance and risk workshops, scenario simulations, sector risk intelligence and anonymised case material. This introduced the possibility of combining Coole Insight's students' union relationships, governance knowledge and convening role with Greenhouse's organisational-development methodology and Howden's specialist risk perspective. From the outset, however, the intention was that any resulting work should remain sector-led, with students' unions determining its purpose, priorities and direction.
- 1.10 A wider sector consultation was launched on 28th May 2026 to test the assumptions emerging from these early discussions. The consultation explored whether unions were aware of merger, partnership or structural-change discussions within their institutions; how early they were involved; whether these issues appeared in governance and risk processes; how prepared they felt; what prevented more active planning; and what forms of support would be most useful. At this point NUS was contacted and made aware of the emerging work as part of maintaining links with the wider sector and to try and drive response rates to the consultation.
- 1.11 By the time the consultation closed on 3rd August, 52 responses had been received, including 49 from chief executives or equivalent senior leaders. The purpose was not to validate a predetermined service or solution, but to establish whether the perceived readiness challenge was real and how the sector itself believed it should be addressed. As the consultation progressed,

the framing of the work continued to evolve. On 28th July, Coole Insight and Greenhouse repositioned the emerging proposition from merger preparedness to strategic readiness for significant institutional and sector change.

- 1.12 This reflected the growing recognition that a merger-only offer would become relevant too late for many unions. A wider readiness framework could support unions facing financial shocks, university restructuring, leadership change, altered funding relationships, federations, shared services, partnerships or mergers. This shift retained the original concern about protecting student voice and identity while making the work relevant to a much broader range of organisations and circumstances.
- 1.13 The emerging direction was reinforced by a separate sector wide conversation via [Universities UK's Transformation and Efficiency Taskforce](#), which identified collaborative structures, shared services, infrastructure, leadership and governance as important elements of sector transformation. Further [UUK evidence published in May 2026](#) indicated that alliances, federations and merger options were moving further into mainstream university planning. This did not suggest that every institution or students' union faced an imminent merger, but it strengthened the case for unions to prepare for a wider range of potential structural and strategic developments.
- 1.14 During the SU consultation, [Phil Gilks](#) highlighted Advance HE's learning from the [City St George's merger](#). This provides an opportunity for any next phase to draw on existing practice, lived experience and wider sector learning rather than duplicating work already undertaken. Coole Insight presented the SU consultation findings at Membership Services Conference: *The Collaboration Games – Play or be Played?* The session emphasised the central choice facing students' unions on whether they wait for institutional change to determine their future or build the readiness, relationships and confidence needed to help shape it.
- 1.15 This report brings together that evolving journey, the consultation evidence, the discussions of the students' union group and the wider work taking place across higher education. It presents the consultation results and analysis, identifies possible forms of support and intervention, and sets out options for the next stage. The direction of the project has not been predetermined.

2. The Consultation Results

- 2.1 The consultation ran from 28 May to 3 August 2026 and received 52 responses from students' unions of different sizes across England, Scotland and Wales. Forty-nine respondents were chief executives, managing directors or equivalent executive leaders.

Area explored	Consultation results
Awareness of institutional change	Six respondents reported active discussions about merger, partnership or structural change, while seven were seeing early signals. Thirty-three were not aware of any such activity and six reported that it was not being considered.
Involvement in university discussions	Seventeen respondents reported being involved at an early stage. Thirteen heard about developments later, 11 were aware of discussions but not involved, six described their involvement as being at arm's length, and five selected another response.
Consideration within governance and risk	Five respondents said structural change was being clearly and actively considered through their governance or risk processes. Seventeen reported limited consideration, 27 said it was not being considered and three were unsure.
Current level of readiness	Forty-eight respondents provided a readiness score. The average score was 49.4 out of 100, with a median of 51 and scores ranging from zero to 100.
Approach to future planning	Thirty respondents reported actively thinking about future scenarios, while 18 were aware of the issues but undertaking limited planning. Three described their focus as primarily short term and one was unsure.
Barriers to further planning	Time and capacity was selected by 32 respondents, followed by a lack of clarity about what to plan for (15), the issue not currently being a priority (13), governance barriers (eight), a lack of suitable tools (four) and organisational culture (three). Seventeen respondents identified other barriers.
Preferred forms of support	Practical tools and frameworks were selected by 25 respondents. Sector intelligence was selected by 21, case studies by 20, peer discussion by 20, facilitated support by 10 and other forms of support by seven.
Willingness to remain involved	Twenty-two respondents said they would be willing to share their experience or contribute further, with a further 18 responding "maybe". Fifty-one of the 52 respondents asked to remain informed about the work.

- 2.2 Free-text responses about the principal risks facing students' unions were grouped into several recurring themes. Financial and resource risks appeared in 28 responses, capacity and delivery risks in 13, influence and access to institutional decision-making in 12, organisational identity and student voice in 10, and risks associated with missed opportunities in five.

- 2.3 The consultation was self-selecting and the results describe the responses received rather than representing a census of the students' union sector. Questions about barriers and preferred support allowed respondents to select more than one option, so these figures do not total 52. The themes identified within the free-text responses were not mutually exclusive, meaning that an individual response could be included under more than one theme.

3. Consultation Analysis

- 3.1 Taken together, the findings describe a sector in which significant institutional change is increasingly plausible, but students' union readiness remains uneven. The central issue is not that every union faces an imminent merger. It is that many are highly dependent on institutions experiencing financial and strategic pressure while lacking the visibility, governance arrangements or capacity needed to prepare for the consequences. The consultation therefore supports the broader framing of strategic readiness rather than a narrow focus on merger preparedness.
- 3.2 Awareness of institutional activity should not be interpreted as a reliable measure of exposure to change. Thirty-three respondents were unaware of any discussions, but only six reported that merger, partnership or structural change was definitely not being considered. In some cases, no activity may be taking place. In others, discussions may be confidential, informal or at too early a stage to have reached the students' union. This distinction matters because a readiness approach that begins only once a formal proposal becomes visible may begin after important choices have already narrowed.
- 3.3 The findings suggest that students' unions are not consistently involved early enough to shape institutional change. Although 17 respondents reported early involvement, 30 said that they heard about developments later, were aware but not involved, or were kept at arm's length. This pattern was even more pronounced among the 13 respondents reporting active discussions or early signals, only two of whom were involved at an early stage. Late involvement risks reducing the role of the students' union from strategic partner and representative body to one of reacting to, or communicating, decisions developed elsewhere.
- 3.4 Institutional access also appears to be connected to confidence and preparedness. The five arm's-length respondents who provided readiness scores averaged 27.4, substantially below the averages reported across the other main involvement categories. The numbers are small and do not establish causation, but the difference indicates that trusted relationships, effective information pathways and access to institutional decision-making are important components of readiness. A union cannot assess risk or develop meaningful scenarios if it does not have sufficient visibility of the environment in which decisions are being made.
- 3.5 Access alone, however, does not guarantee organisational preparedness. Six of the 17 unions reporting early involvement also said that structural change was absent from their risk register or strategic thinking. This points to two separate but connected requirements which are the external ability to

participate in university conversations and the internal ability to translate information into governance, scrutiny and action. Strong institutional relationships without effective internal processes may not lead to preparation, while strong internal governance without access to information may be based on an incomplete picture.

- 3.6 Formal consideration through governance and risk processes is the clearest indicator associated with higher self-assessed readiness. Average readiness increased from 43.0 among respondents where structural change was not being considered, to 56.6 where it received limited or indirect attention, and to 68.0 where it was being considered clearly and actively. These figures describe an association rather than proving that risk-register inclusion causes greater readiness. Nevertheless, they suggest that preparedness becomes stronger when emerging change is made explicit, assigned organisational attention and considered by boards and senior leaders.
- 3.7 There is also a gap between strategic intention and established organisational practice. Thirty respondents said that they were actively thinking about future sustainability and different scenarios, yet 12 of this group said that structural change was either absent from their governance and risk processes or that they were unsure. This suggests that forward thinking is taking place, but is not always being translated into documented risks, agreed responsibilities, scenario planning or board-level discussions and decisions.
- 3.8 The readiness scores reinforce this picture. The average score of 49.4 and median of 51 indicate moderate confidence overall, but the range from zero to 100 shows substantial variation between organisations. Half of those providing a score rated themselves at 50 or below, while only six placed themselves in the highest readiness band. The consultation therefore does not describe either a uniformly unprepared sector or a consistently confident one. It describes unions with markedly different starting points, institutional relationships, resources and exposure to change. A single sector benchmark would risk obscuring these differences.
- 3.9 Limited capacity appears to be an important reason why strategic awareness has not always developed into practical preparation. Time and capacity were the dominant barrier, selected by 32 respondents, more than twice the number selecting any other named barrier. A lack of clarity about what to plan for and the issue not being an immediate priority were also significant. The findings do not primarily suggest an absence of concern. Instead, they indicate that longer-term preparation is competing with immediate financial, operational and leadership pressures, particularly where there is no visible event creating an urgent reason to act.
- 3.10 The principal risks identified by respondents are interconnected rather than separate. Financial and resource dependency was the most frequent theme, but respondents also highlighted organisational capacity, access to institutional decision-making, identity, representation and student voice. A deterioration in university finances could reduce a union's income, staffing and service capacity while simultaneously increasing its dependence on the institution and weakening its ability to influence change. Structural developments may also affect which student communities are represented,

how democratic accountability operates and whether the union retains a distinct organisational voice. These are governance and representation issues, rather than simply matters of organisational branding.

- 3.11 The consultation also shows that significant change should not be considered solely as a threat. A smaller number of respondents identified opportunities arising from collaboration, shared approaches or organisational development. This supports an analysis based on informed choice rather than automatic resistance to change. Readiness should enable students' unions to identify what must be protected, where opportunities may exist and how they can influence outcomes in the interests of students.
- 3.12 Respondents' support preferences are consistent with this interpretation. Practical tools, sector intelligence, case studies and peer discussion attracted more interest than externally facilitated support. Among respondents scoring 50 or below for readiness, 17 of 24 selected practical tools or frameworks. This suggests that less-ready unions are not necessarily seeking complex or intensive intervention. They are looking for accessible ways to understand their position, learn from others and begin more structured conversations within their organisations.
- 3.13 These findings align with the wider direction described through UUK's work on transformation, collaboration and efficiency. They also strengthen the case for drawing on existing experience, including the work highlighted by Phil Gilks and Advance HE, while ensuring that the particular implications for students' union independence, governance and student representation remain visible. Wider higher education learning can provide valuable evidence, but it does not replace the need for an approach shaped by the realities of students' unions.
- 3.14 The willingness of 40 respondents to consider sharing their experience, together with the 51 who asked to remain informed, provides a strong basis for continuing the sector conversation. This should be understood as evidence of relevance and permission to develop the work further, rather than approval for a predetermined product or delivery model. It reinforces the importance of the next phase remaining sector-led and being shaped through the students' union group.
- 3.15 Overall, the consultation indicates that strategic readiness is an organisational capability rather than a response to one predicted event. The most important question is not simply whether a merger or partnership is currently being discussed. It is whether a students' union has the relationships, governance, evidence, capacity and strategic choices needed to protect student interests and help shape significant change before urgency removes its room to act.

4. Potential Support and Intervention Options

- 4.1 Before publication, the report will be shared with the 52 participating students' unions. This will provide those organisations with advance sight of the findings and an opportunity to identify any factual errors or points requiring clarification. It will not require participating unions to approve or endorse the report's conclusions.
- 4.2 Following this process, Coole Insight intends to publish the report and share it across the students' union sector and with relevant sector bodies. Publication and dissemination are therefore confirmed parts of the work rather than options for consideration. The report will provide a common evidence base for wider discussion about students' union readiness, institutional change and collaboration.
- 4.3 The options below concern what happens after publication. They vary in scale, investment, reach and the level of direct support provided to students' unions. They are not mutually exclusive and could be introduced sequentially or combined within a hybrid model. They are presented to support discussion and decision-making by the open students' union forum rather than to pre-empt Coole Insight's recommendations in the following section.
- 4.4 Across the options, Coole Insight would provide the sector relationships, convening, programme coordination, governance expertise and focus on student voice. Greenhouse would provide the organisational-development methodology, readiness framework, facilitation design and support for translating insight into organisational action. Students' unions would retain ownership of the direction and purpose of the work through an open sector forum in which any students' union can participate and be represented if it wishes to join.
- 4.5 Participation in the forum would not imply that every member endorses every proposal or outcome. If the work develops into a formal programme, clear decision-making and accountability arrangements would be required. This could include a smaller steering or delivery group drawn transparently from the wider forum and remaining accountable to it, while preserving the open nature of the wider sector conversation.
- 4.6 At this stage, Howden is not committed to any of the options described below. Subject to further discussion and separate agreement, its possible contribution could include specialist risk insight, participation in scenario-based activity / workshops, anonymised risk intelligence, support for shared resources or funding that improves access to the work. Any involvement would require transparent boundaries, protection of confidential information and clear separation between sector-development activity and any commercial relationship.

Option 1: Ongoing sector engagement and intelligence

- 4.7 The lightest option following publication would be to maintain and develop the open students' union forum as a space for continuing discussion, intelligence sharing and monitoring of sector developments. Any students' union could join and be represented, irrespective of whether it participated in the original consultation. Activity could include occasional briefings or roundtables examining emerging institutional changes, collaboration activity and the implications for students' unions.
- 4.8 Coole Insight could coordinate communication with consultation respondents and the wider sector, convene forum discussions and maintain relationships with other relevant sector bodies. Greenhouse could support the interpretation of emerging developments from an organisational-change perspective. Students' unions could contribute experience and intelligence on a voluntary and proportionate basis.
- 4.9 This option would maintain momentum, widen participation and provide a mechanism for identifying new developments without immediately creating a formal programme. It would require relatively limited infrastructure and could help determine whether demand for more structured support grows following publication. Its limitation is that it would provide little direct assistance to unions currently seeking to strengthen their governance, planning or organisational readiness.

Option 2: Shared resources and peer learning

- 4.10 A second option would be to develop a light-touch collection of practical resources available across the sector. This could include a strategic-readiness self-check, board discussion prompts, scenario exercises, risk and opportunity questions, case studies and short briefings on emerging developments. The resources could be supported by peer roundtables, webinars or action-learning discussions through which unions share experience and explore common challenges.
- 4.11 Coole Insight could convene the peer network, curate sector intelligence and ensure that governance, independence and student voice remain central. Greenhouse could lead the design of the readiness methodology and supporting materials, ensuring that they are practical and grounded in organisational-development practice. Students' union leaders and other experienced practitioners could contribute case material, test resources and help facilitate discussions. The open students' union forum could advise on priorities and review resources as they develop.
- 4.12 Where appropriate and separately agreed, Howden could potentially contribute specialist risk perspectives or support wider access to the resources. Any such contribution would be clearly identified and would not affect the sector's ownership of the work.
- 4.13 This option would respond directly to the strong consultation interest in tools, sector insight, case studies and peer discussion. It could reach a comparatively large number of unions without requiring them to enter an

intensive programme. However, self-directed resources may have limited impact where leadership capacity is already stretched or where a union requires facilitated support to convert discussion into decisions and action.

Option 3: A co-designed pilot programme

- 4.14 A third option would be to undertake a time-limited development and pilot phase with a small and varied group of students' unions from which there has already been an expression of interest. This could test a structured Strategic Readiness Review covering areas such as governance and decision-making, institutional relationships, financial and risk resilience, organisational capacity, strategic intent, identity and student voice. Participating unions could include organisations facing active change alongside those seeking to prepare before a specific trigger emerges.
- 4.15 Coole Insight and Greenhouse could jointly coordinate and deliver the pilot, with Coole Insight acting as the accountable sector convener and Greenhouse leading the development of the methodology and organisational-change process. The open students' union forum could help shape the pilot brief, advise on the range of organisations involved and review the learning before any decision about wider development. Experienced students' union leaders could participate as design partners, critical reviewers or co-facilitators.
- 4.16 Subject to its own decision-making and separate agreement, Howden could potentially contribute risk expertise, scenario input, anonymised insight or enabling support for pilot access and evaluation. Any such involvement would be confirmed separately and would not be assumed within the design of the pilot.
- 4.17 A pilot would allow the framework to be tested in real organisational settings and provide evidence about its usefulness, proportionality and resource requirements. It could also generate practical case studies and establish whether the approach leads to stronger board discussion, clearer decisions or identifiable action. Its initial reach would be limited, and participating unions would need sufficient time and organisational commitment to engage meaningfully.

Option 4: A national, sector-led strategic-readiness programme

- 4.18 The most developed option would be to establish an ongoing national programme through which students' unions could access different levels of support according to their circumstances. This could combine sector intelligence and shared resources with facilitated readiness reviews, scenario exercises, peer learning and more targeted organisational support. The model could provide an entry point for unions seeking to prepare generally, as well as more intensive support for those responding to active institutional change.
- 4.19 Under this option, Coole Insight could hold responsibility for programme coordination, sector engagement, governance, communications, quality assurance and maintaining the focus on student voice. Greenhouse could own and develop the organisational-development methodology, support facilitator

training and ensure consistency in how readiness reviews and related interventions are delivered.

- 4.20 Strategic direction would remain with the open students' union forum, in which any students' union could participate and be represented. A smaller steering group could be established to provide more regular oversight and support timely decision-making. Its membership, remit and decision-making authority would need to be transparent, with the steering group remaining accountable to the wider forum.
- 4.21 If Howden wished to participate, possible roles could include contributing specialist risk knowledge, supporting scenario development, sharing appropriate anonymised insight or providing enabling investment for common infrastructure, evaluation or equitable access. Participation would remain subject to agreement, with clear safeguards around independence, confidentiality, data use and commercial boundaries.
- 4.22 A national programme would offer the greatest opportunity to build consistent sector capability and create a shared evidence base. It would also carry the greatest requirements in relation to funding, governance, administration, quality assurance and delivery capacity. Its sustainability would depend on demonstrable demand, an appropriate financial model and the ability to expand without losing the trust, independence and open sector ownership on which the work depends.

Option 5: A hybrid and phased approach

- 4.23 A further option would be to combine selected elements from the preceding options rather than adopting a single delivery model. For example, the open students' union forum and regular sector intelligence could be maintained alongside the development of selected practical resources, a small pilot programme and targeted peer-learning activity. Different elements could be introduced at different stages according to sector demand, available capacity, evidence of impact and funding.
- 4.24 Coole Insight could coordinate the overall programme and sector relationships, while Greenhouse could develop the methodology and ensure that the different activities form a coherent readiness approach. The open students' union forum could help determine which elements should be prioritised and review how the model develops. Any potential contribution from Howden could be considered separately for each element and would remain subject to discussion and agreement.
- 4.25 A hybrid model would provide flexibility and allow the work to grow proportionately without requiring immediate commitment to a fully developed national programme. It could also enable different students' unions to engage at different levels according to their circumstances. However, it would require clear coordination, sequencing and communication to ensure that the work remained coherent and did not become a disconnected collection of activities. Sector-led capacity and remuneration

- 4.26 Any option extending beyond ongoing engagement would need to consider how sufficient sector capacity could be created and sustained. A sector-led model cannot depend indefinitely on the unpaid goodwill of a small number of chief executives or other experienced individuals. This would risk excluding leaders from smaller or more financially constrained unions, concentrating delivery among those with the greatest organisational flexibility and creating a model that could not operate consistently at national scale.
- 4.27 Participation in the open forum could remain voluntary and proportionate. However, a distinction should be made between contributing to sector discussion and undertaking substantive work on behalf of the project. Potential commissioned roles could include co-designing resources, developing case studies, facilitating peer activity, mentoring participating unions, delivering readiness reviews, evaluating pilots and providing quality assurance.
- 4.28 These roles could be undertaken by serving students' union chief executives, other senior leaders, governance specialists, former students' union leaders and individuals with relevant lived or professional experience. Maintaining a broad pool of contributors would help the work reflect the diversity of students' unions and avoid over-reliance on a small number of individuals.
- 4.29 Where roles involve substantive preparation, facilitation or delivery, the model would need to provide appropriate payment. This could take the form of facilitator fees, payment to the employing students' union to release or backfill staff time, or another transparent arrangement agreed with the individual and their organisation. Travel, training, supervision and continuing development would also need to be resourced. Clear arrangements would be required to manage accountability, conflicts of interest and the distinction between voluntary sector contribution and commissioned delivery.
- 4.30 Over time, a trained and supported pool of sector practitioners could increase national capacity while retaining the credibility of peer-led work. Coole Insight and Greenhouse could provide coordination, methodology, training and quality assurance, with the practitioner pool growing only as demand and supervisory capacity allowed. This would make sector leadership a practical and properly resourced part of the delivery model rather than relying on consultation or voluntary participation alone.
- 4.31 These options provide different answers to the questions of pace, scale, access and investment. The decision is not whether the report should be published, but how its findings should be carried forward following publication, how much supporting infrastructure the sector wishes to create and how open sector ownership and delivery capacity can be sustained. The following section sets out Coole Insight's recommended next steps.

5. Recommended Next Steps

- 5.1 Coole Insight recommends adopting a phased hybrid approach. This would combine publication and continued sector engagement with the co-design and testing of a practical Strategic Readiness Review. A small pilot would be completed and evaluated before any decision was made to launch a wider national programme. This approach would maintain momentum while avoiding the premature launch of an untested intervention.
- 5.2 The indicative timeline below reflects Coole Insight's preferred route from August 2026 into the 2027–28 academic year. It takes account of the significant operational pressures placed on students' unions during Welcome preparation and delivery. The intention is to provide participating unions with advance sight of the report before those pressures reach their peak, without creating an expectation that they must respond during one of the busiest periods of their year.
- 5.3 The timetable remains subject to the direction of the open students' union forum, the availability of participating unions and practitioners, and sufficient resources to undertake the pilot properly. Potential Howden involvement would be explored separately and is not assumed within the timetable.

Stage 1: Review by the open students' union forum: 17th to 21st August 2026

- 5.4 The first stage will be to share the draft report with the open students' union forum. The purpose will be to test whether the report accurately reflects the discussion that initiated the work, whether the analysis and options are balanced, and whether any significant sector perspectives have been overlooked. The forum will also be invited to comment on Coole Insight's proposed next steps and the principles that should govern the pilot.
- 5.5 Any students' union can join and be represented within the forum. Participation will not require an organisation to endorse every conclusion or commit to future delivery. Given the intended circulation date of 26th August, this initial review will need to focus on significant issues of accuracy, balance and direction rather than detailed drafting amendments.
- 5.6 Coole Insight will consider the forum's feedback and make any necessary revisions between 24th and 25th August. The forum should also begin considering how it wishes to provide direction and sign-off as the project develops, including whether a smaller steering group is required to support timely decisions while remaining accountable to the wider open forum.

Stage 2: Advance circulation to the 52 participating students' unions: 26th August 2026

- 5.7 The revised report will be shared with the 52 students' unions that responded to the consultation on 26 August 2026. The purpose of this stage is to recognise their contribution, provide advance sight of the findings and allow respondents to identify factual errors, unintended identifiability or points requiring clarification before publication.

- 5.8 The accompanying communication should make clear that no immediate response is required and that silence will not be treated as approval or endorsement. Respondents will not be asked to undertake a detailed review while preparing for or delivering Welcome activity. Any feedback should be limited principally to factual accuracy, confidentiality and how participating unions are acknowledged.
- 5.9 To avoid creating additional pressure during Welcome, respondents should be able to provide any comments on a flexible basis up to 2nd October 2026. Those able to respond earlier may do so, but there should be no expectation that unions prioritise the report over immediate operational responsibilities.
- 5.10 Respondents will also be invited to indicate, either at this stage or later, whether they would like to join the open forum, contribute experience or case material, participate in the pilot, or remain informed without taking on a more active role. Any public acknowledgement of participating unions should be confirmed through an appropriate consent process.

Stage 3: Finalisation, publication and wider sector engagement: October 2026

- 5.11 Coole Insight will consider any comments received from participating unions and complete final revisions during the week commencing 5 October. Subject to any significant issues requiring further consideration, the report should be published during the week commencing 12 October 2026.
- 5.12 The report will be shared across the students' union sector and sent directly to relevant sector bodies, as well as other organisations whose work connects with institutional transformation, collaboration, governance and student representation.
- 5.13 The purpose of publication is to create a shared evidence base, increase awareness of the readiness challenge and invite wider participation in the next phase. A publication briefing or open sector session could be used to present the principal findings, explain the proposed pilot and invite students' unions to join the open forum or express an interest in participating.
- 5.14 Engagement with relevant sector bodies should identify existing or emerging work, opportunities for shared learning and potential areas of collaboration. It should also help ensure that the project builds on, rather than duplicates, work already undertaken elsewhere.

Stage 4: Co-design and pilot preparation: October to December 2026

- 5.15 Coole Insight recommends using the period following publication to develop a minimum viable version of the Strategic Readiness Review. The purpose is not to create a finished national product, but to produce a sufficiently developed and consistent approach that can be tested in different students' union contexts.
- 5.16 Coole Insight and Greenhouse would lead this stage collaboratively. Coole Insight would coordinate the programme, engage participating unions and ensure that governance, independence and student voice remain central.

Greenhouse would lead the organisational-development methodology and design of the review process. The open students' union forum would test the relevance, language and proportionality of the emerging approach.

- 5.17 The framework could initially examine six areas: horizon visibility; governance and decision-making; institutional relationships; financial and risk resilience; organisational capacity and culture; and strategic intent, identity and student voice. Pilot design would also need to establish confidentiality and data arrangements, expected organisational commitment, evaluation measures, costs, practitioner roles and the outputs each participating union would receive.
- 5.18 During this stage, Coole Insight could hold further discussions with Howden about whether it wished to contribute specialist risk expertise, scenario input, anonymised intelligence or enabling support. Any role would be subject to separate agreement and clear safeguards. The pilot methodology should remain credible and deliverable without assuming a Howden commitment.

Stage 5: Pilot recruitment and sector capacity: November to December 2026

- 5.19 Coole Insight recommends recruiting one students' union as a deeper design partner and two further unions as lighter validation pilots. The cohort should reflect different organisational circumstances and could include a union experiencing active or emerging institutional change, alongside a union with no known immediate structural event but significant financial, governance or institutional-relationship exposure.
- 5.20 Selection should also consider organisational size, UK nation, current readiness, institutional access and leadership capacity. The intention would not be to create a representative sample, but to test whether the approach remains relevant and proportionate in contrasting settings.
- 5.21 Experienced chief executives and other appropriate sector practitioners should be invited to contribute as critical reviewers, mentors or co-facilitators. Where their involvement requires substantive preparation or delivery, time should be properly funded through professional fees, payment to the employing students' union for release or backfill, or another transparent arrangement. This stage should begin testing how a sustainable national pool of sector practitioners could be developed without relying on unpaid goodwill.

Stage 6: Pilot delivery: January to April 2027

- 5.22 The design-partner pilot would test the fuller Strategic Readiness Review, potentially including document review, targeted interviews and a facilitated board or leadership session. The anticipated outputs could include a readiness profile, priority risks and opportunities, immediate actions and a longer-term organisational roadmap. The two validation pilots could test lighter or adapted versions of the process.
- 5.23 The purpose of the pilot is to establish whether the approach helps unions ask better questions, identify previously unrecognised exposure, strengthen board-level discussion and make clearer strategic choices. It should also test

the practical demands placed on participants, the time and cost of delivery, the value of peer involvement and the extent to which the methodology can be applied consistently without becoming overly standardised.

- 5.24 Coole Insight would remain accountable for programme coordination, sector relationships, governance and quality assurance. Greenhouse would lead the application and refinement of the organisational-development methodology. Paid sector practitioners could shadow or co-facilitate elements of the pilot, with appropriate training, support and supervision.

Stage 7: Evaluation and sector decision: May to June 2027

- 5.25 Following completion, the pilot should be evaluated against evidence agreed during the design stage. This should consider participant experience, board and leadership outcomes, actions taken, proportionality, delivery cost, confidentiality, practitioner capacity and the relevance of the approach across different organisational contexts.
- 5.26 The learning should be shared with the open students' union forum through an anonymised evaluation, supported by case studies where participating unions have given consent. The forum should then consider whether the methodology should be refined, extended, paused or developed into a broader national offer.
- 5.27 This represents the principal decision point for the project. A national launch should proceed only if the pilot demonstrates that the approach is useful, trusted, deliverable and sufficiently distinct from support already available elsewhere. The decision should also take account of sector demand, available capacity, funding, quality assurance and any agreed role for external partners.

Stage 8: Development and launch of national support: July to September 2027

- 5.28 If the pilot evidence supports further development, the summer of 2027 would be used to finalise the resources, delivery model, governance and financial arrangements for launch during the 2027–28 academic year. The final offer should be determined by the pilot findings rather than fixed in advance.
- 5.29 A national offer could combine openly available tools and sector intelligence with peer-learning opportunities, facilitated Strategic Readiness Reviews, scenario exercises and more targeted organisational support. Different unions could enter at different levels according to their needs, capacity and exposure to change.
- 5.30 Coole Insight would coordinate the national programme, sector engagement, communications, governance and quality assurance. Greenhouse would maintain and develop the organisational-development methodology and support facilitator training and supervision. The open students' union forum would continue to guide the strategic direction, with any smaller steering group operating transparently and remaining accountable to it.

- 5.31 Before launch, an appropriate funding and access model would need to be agreed. This should consider the cost of maintaining shared resources, providing equitable access to pilots or reviews, paying sector practitioners, evaluating impact and supporting the coordination and quality assurance required for national delivery. Any contribution from Howden or another external organisation would be confirmed separately and communicated transparently.
- 5.32 Subject to these stages being completed, Coole Insight's preferred ambition would be to launch an evidence-based, sector-led and proportionate readiness offer for the 2027–28 academic year. The aim would not be to predict or promote a particular structural outcome, but to give students' unions the relationships, governance, evidence, capacity and confidence needed to shape change before their options become constrained.

Steve Coole
Director, Coole Insight

Report Opinions

The analysis, observations, opinions and recommendations contained in this report are those of Coole Insight unless otherwise stated. They do not necessarily represent the views of, or imply endorsement by, participating students' unions, members of the open students' union forum, Greenhouse, Howden or any of the sector bodies referenced. The consultation findings have been presented in good faith, based on the responses and information available at the time of writing.

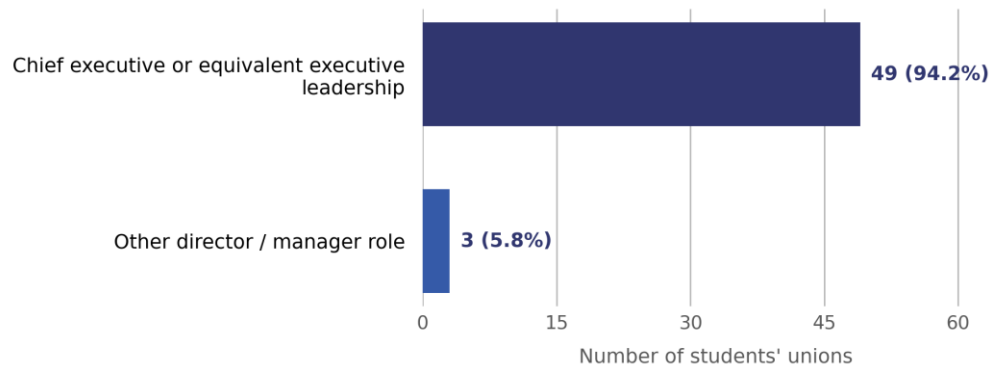
Appendix A. Consultation results by question

The following charts present the consultation results question by question. Counts and percentages are shown together, with the relevant response base identified for each question. Percentages for multiple-selection questions and grouped free-text themes may total more than 100 per cent.

Fieldwork: 28 May to 3 August 2026 / 52 completed responses

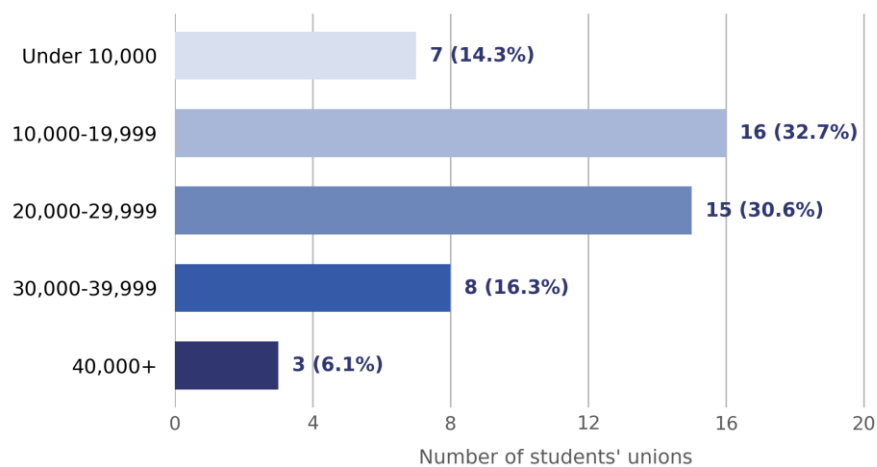
Question 1: Respondent role

Base: 52 respondents



Question 2: Student population represented

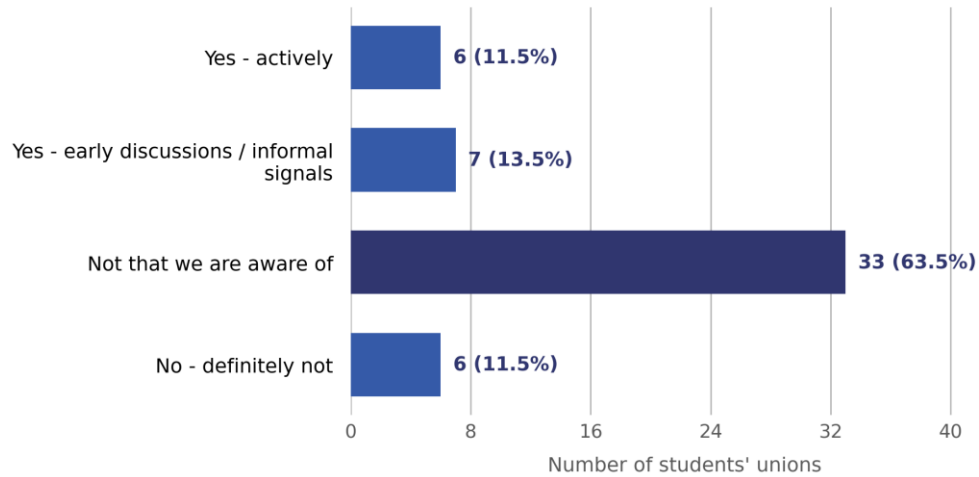
Base: 49 usable estimates; 3 missing or unclear



Question 3: Known institutional change activity

To your knowledge, is your institution currently exploring or discussing any form of merger, partnership, or structural change?

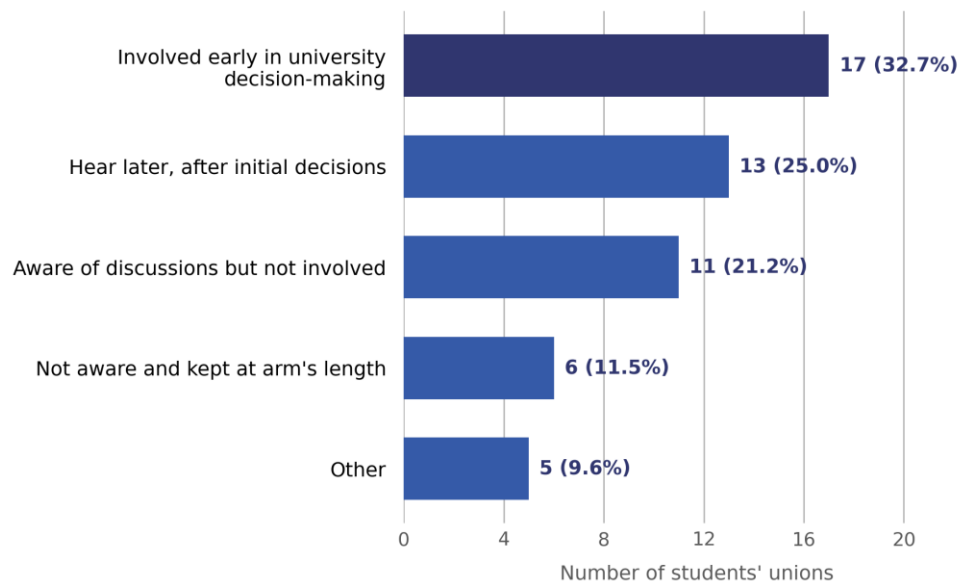
Base: 52 respondents



Question 4: SU involvement in university decision-making

Which of the following statements feels most aligned to your SU?

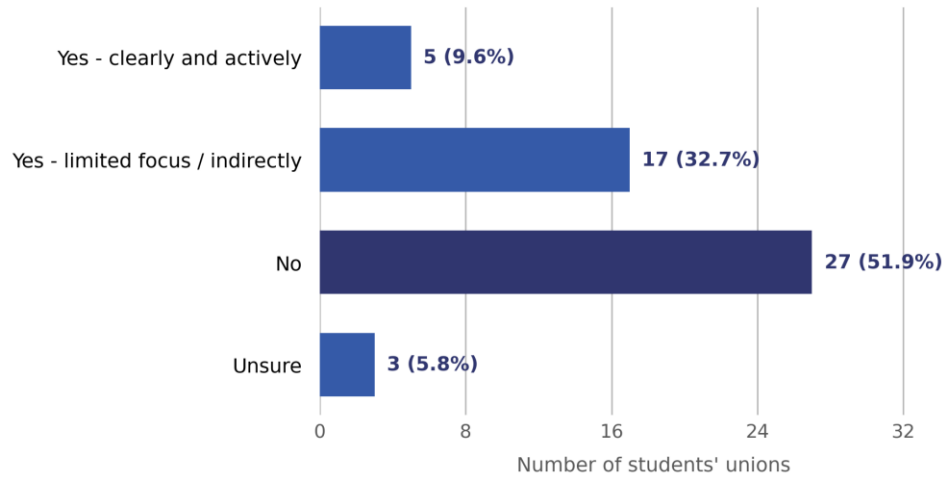
Base: 52 respondents



Question 5: Structural change in risk and strategic thinking

Is institutional structural change (e.g. mergers/partnerships) currently considered in your SU's risk register or strategic thinking?

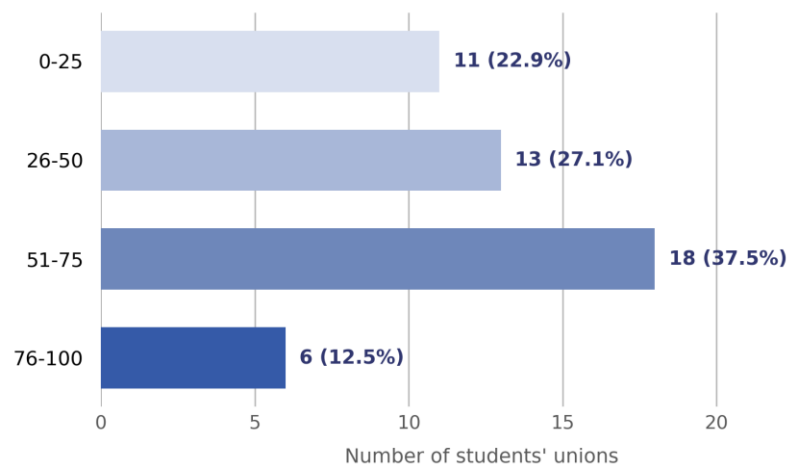
Base: 52 respondents



Question 6: Self-assessed readiness

How prepared do you feel your SU is for significant organisational or institutional change?

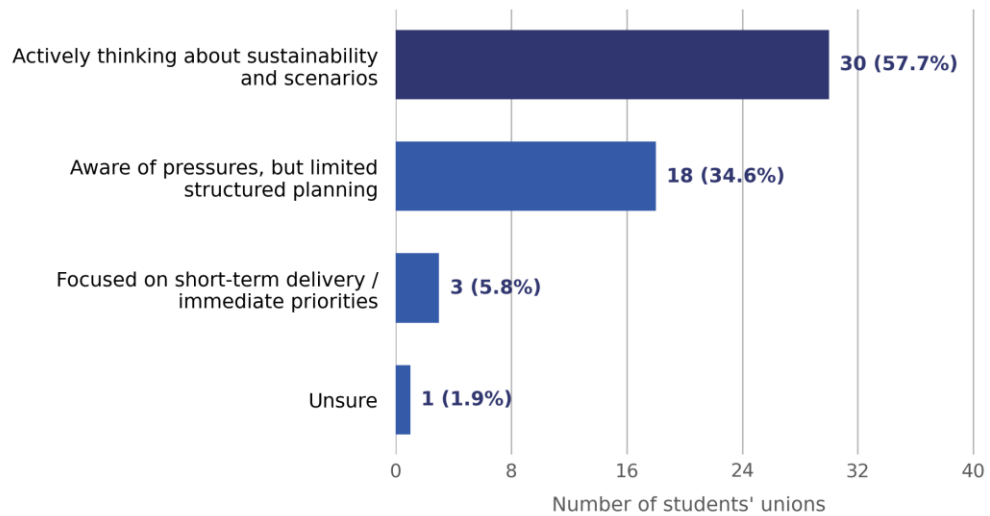
Base: 48 valid scores; 4 missing



Question 7: Current strategic posture

Which of the following best reflects your SU's current position?

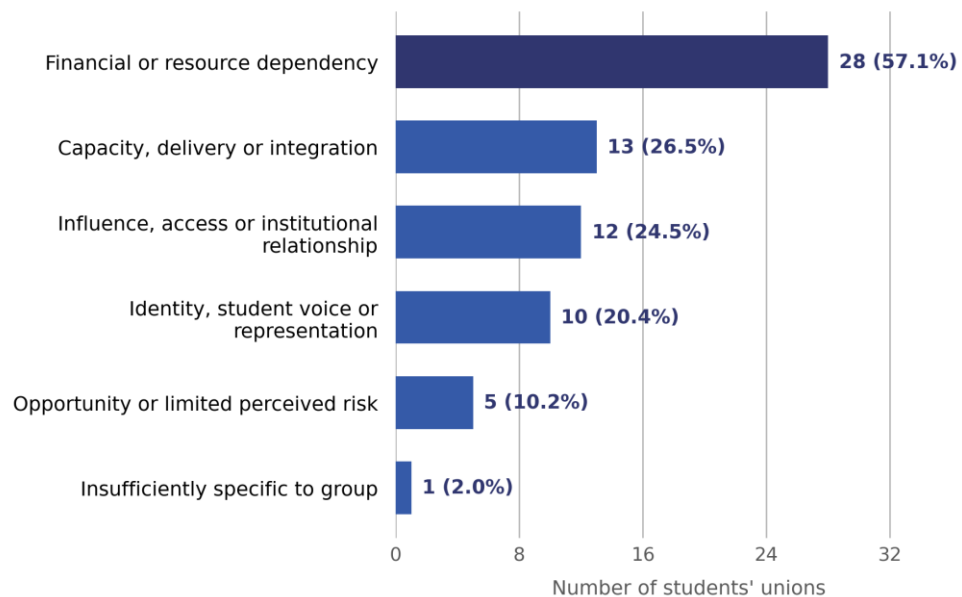
Base: 52 respondents



Question 8: Biggest perceived risk

What is the biggest risk to your SU if significant institutional change were to happen?

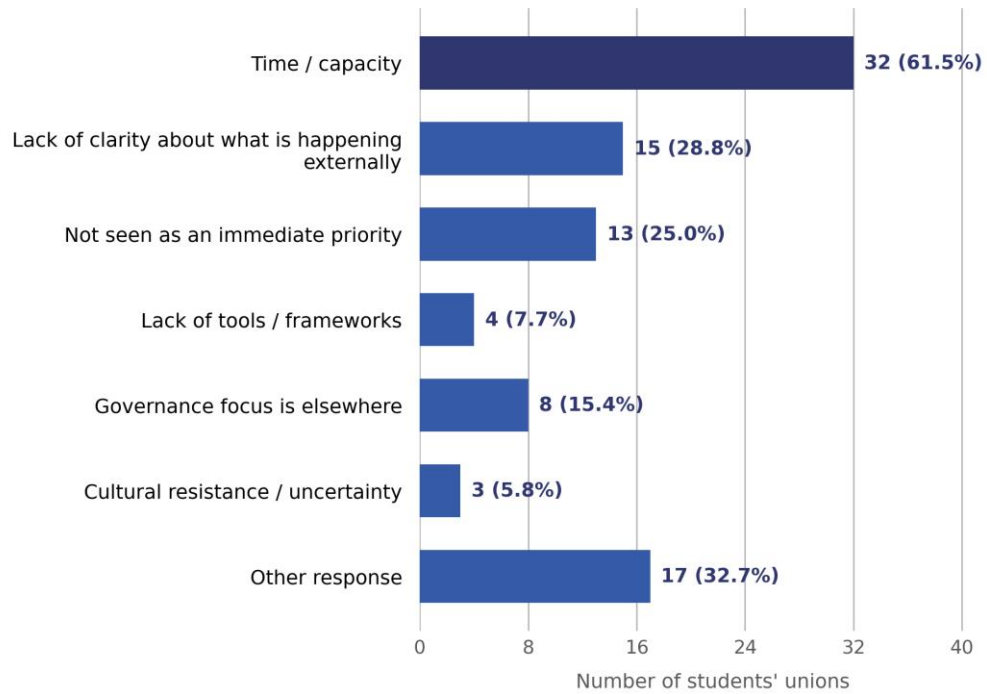
Base: 49 substantive responses; 3 blank



Question 9: Barriers to strategic engagement

What are the biggest barriers to engaging with this type of strategic thinking right now?
(Select up to 2)

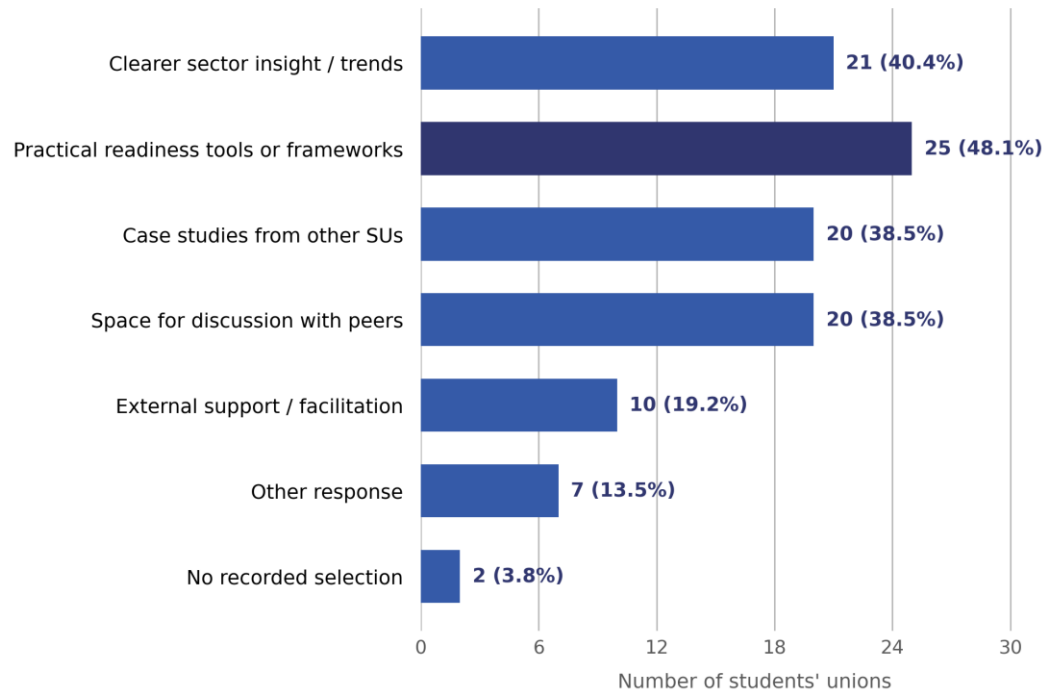
Base: 52 respondents; multi-select



Question 10: Support respondents would find helpful

What would be most helpful in supporting your SU to better understand or prepare for this context? (Select up to 2)

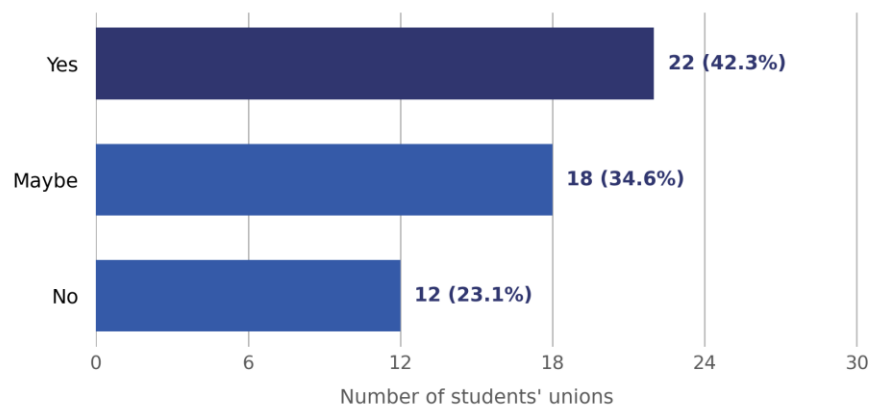
Base: 52 respondents; multi-select



Question 11: Openness to sharing experience

Would you be open to sharing your SU's experience or perspective as part of this work?

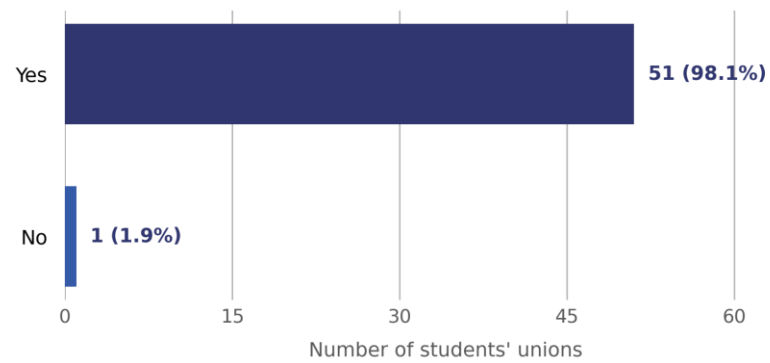
Base: 52 respondents



Question 12: Interest in staying informed

Finally, would you like to stay informed about this area of work as it develops across the sector?

Base: 52 respondents



Appendix B. Participating students' unions

The 52 participating students' unions are listed below.

Participating SU	Participating SU
1. Aberystwyth Students' Union	27. Nottingham Trent Students' Union
2. Arts Students' Union	28. Oxford Students' Union
3. Arts University Plymouth Students' Union	29. Queen Margaret University SU
4. Aston Students' Union	30. Queen Mary Students' Union
5. Aberdeen University Students' Association	31. Royal College of Art Students' Union
6. Bath Spa University Students' Union	32. Royal Holloway Students' Union
7. Bradford Students' Union	33. Salford Students' Union
8. Cardiff University Students' Union	34. St Andrews Students' Association
9. Cardiff Met SU	35. Stirling Students' Union
10. Christ Church Students' Union	36. Students' Union UCL
11. Coventry University Students' Union	37. Sunderland Students' Union
12. Cranfield Students Association	38. University of Sussex Students' Union
13. De Montfort Students' Union	39. Swansea University Students' Union
14. Edge Hill Students' Union	40. Teesside Students' Union
15. Exeter Guild	41. The Students' Union at UWE
16. GCU Students' Association	42. Undeb Bangor
17. Hallam Students Union	43. Union of Brunel Students
18. Harper Adams Students' Union	44. Union of Students Derby
19. Huddersfield Students' Union	45. University for the Creative Arts Students Union
20. Hull University Union	46. University of Birmingham Guild of Students
21. Imperial College Union	47. University of Manchester Students' Union
22. Leeds Beckett Students' Union	48. University of Southampton Students' Union
23. Leicester SU	49. University of West London SU
24. Liverpool John Moores University Students' Union (JMSU)	50. University of Westminster SU
25. Newcastle University Students' Union	51. University of Wales TSDSU
26. Northumbria Students' Union	52. York Students' Union