

Activities Access Fund 2024-2025 Report

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Executive Summary

- Review on the AAF Summary report

Introduction

Background

The Activities Access Fund (AAF) is a collaborative project between Newcastle University Students' Union (NUSU) and Newcastle University (NU). For more than a decade this fund has been tackling the financial barriers that hinder students' access to and participation in extracurriculars.

Although in previous years this Fund has been available to all students, criteria set by NU's Access and Participation Plan (APP) restricts applications to undergraduate (UG), home students who are eligible for one of the twenty criteria.

The 24-25 fund was allocated in an unprecedented 6.5 weeks in term 1 on a *first come first serve basis* using student que numbers and allocated groups.

Process

The process involved three main stages: Registering Interest Stage → Application Stage → Claiming Stage (see nusu.co.uk/funds further information).

Over half of the students who had registered their interest were grouped based on their que number and then invited to apply accordingly, from 20th September 2024 until early November.

As of 11th December 2024, 1071 expressions of interest is received. This form is still open to capture new interest throughout the year (for example, for new students who start in January).

Funding Spent

The SU received 554 applications of which 539 were successful, 12 were unsuccessful and 3 were duplicates.

All the unsuccessful applicants were the result of applying under a criterion that they were not eligible for including PARTNERs scheme only (6), both PARTNERs scheme and an additional criterion (2), low participation background (3), and Opportunity/Undergraduate scholarship (1). Students were deemed successful as they provided adequate and necessary evidence of their activity costs and eligibility. Many students applied on a PARTNERs basis, 53.8%. This was then followed by **31% of students applying as BAME** and **19% as an Opportunity or Undergraduate scholarship receiver** (Appendix 1). The majority of successful students were either stage 2 or stage 3.

The APP provided a total of £148,635.00 for the Activities Access Fund. From this total, a maximum amount of £350 could be allocated per student although the amount requested was seen to vary from student to student, anywhere from £15 - £350. Although an average of £275.76 was allocated per successful student.

Applications Breakdown

There was a variation in what students requested the Fund for. However, a common theme was funding to cover membership at the Newcastle University Sports Centre. Of the 1517 funding requests listed, 254 (**16.74%**) were for a Sport and Fitness membership (TABLE 1).

TABLE 1: Funding requests for various SU activities from 24-25 Applications.

<i>Cost/Activity</i>	<i>Percentage (%) of Total Requests</i>
Club/Society Membership	32.50
Intramural Membership	2.77
Sport and Fitness Membership	16.74
Sport Membership	8.97
Fitness Membership	3.63
External Venue Costs	1.78
Socials	4.75
Transport	1.91
Equipment Costs	4.15
Kit Costs	6.99
Competition or Accreditation	3.89
Membership/Entry	
Competition costs (kit, travel, equipment)	2.31
Summer Ball	1.58
Winter Ball	2.70
Summer and Winter balls	5.34

PARTNERS Information

Successful AAF recipient Student IDs were shared with the PARTNERS team to provide more insight on the eligibility of the applicants. This provides a fuller picture compared to what applicants submit in their application. The below tables summarise the 539 successful applicants:

TABLE 2: The eligibility breakdown of 539 applicants received from the PARTNERS Team. The INTO criteria included only 1 student.

PARTNERS	55.0%
INTO Diploma St	31.0%
Non-Assigned	12.0%
Realising Opportunity	1.0%
Sutton Trust	1.0%
Widening Participation	12.0%

Widening Participation indicates they've had a contextual offer based on either their postcode, experience of care or entitlement to free school meals. [Sutton Trust](#) and [Realising Opportunities](#) are other contextual routes to University, both aimed at Widening Participation Students, with criteria aligning closely with PARTNERS Students.

The PARTNERS Applicants (55%) are broken down further into their eligibility in the below table:

TABLE 3: The eligibility breakdown of 295 applicants who were identified as PARTNERS Students, often on more than one eligibility. No applicants were identified under the Gypsy, Roma, Traveller criteria.

Eligibility	Percentage of applicants
Home Postcode	34.2%
Financial Support	12.2%
School/College Eligible	4.5%
Care experienced	1.8%
Parental Experience	18.3%
Disability	1.8%
Carer	0.8%
Estranged	0.8%
BAME + State	22.6%
MILITARY	0.6%
Gypsy, Roma, Traveller	0.0%
Refugee / Asylum Seeker or Humanitarian Protection	0.6%
Student Parent	0.4%
PEC	1.6%

It is important to note that this reflects 8.4% of all PARTNERS students, 8.9% of all Realising Opportunities students, 8.6% Sutton Trust students, 2.6% of all WP students. In other words, this fund supported only 5.9% of all Undergraduate students who have entered Newcastle University under a Widening Participation basis or 1.8% of all Undergraduate students.¹

¹ Data received from Newcastle University's Senior Strategic Planning Manager

Evaluation

Methodology

Theory of Change

The Theory of Change (ToC) is a comprehensive method of evaluation illustrating the reasons driving a desired and expected change as well as the pathways of how this desired change occurs in certain contexts.² This is the third iteration of this evaluation methodology for this scheme. This particular evaluation is less in-depth, reflects on the previous model and suggests recommendations and a new ToC model for the 2025-2026 year.

The ToC approach is used to increase the robustness of the evaluation in line with the Office for Students' requirements, to prepare the scheme for future evaluation requirements, and to enhance learning from the process. This methodology aims to identify gaps and areas of improvements for the AAF scheme to implement a revised scheme to better benefit staff and students involved.

Student Data - Survey

The Activities Access Fund (AAF) Survey was conducted in November 2024 and was open for 2.5 weeks. The form received 127 submissions, which represent only 23.6% of the 24-25 year's AAF recipients. This misses the target of 35% (ToC Model 24-25) but is an increase from the previous year's 18%.

A full breakdown of respondent demographics can be found in the Appendix 2.

The survey collated both **quantitative and qualitative data from respondents**. Quantitative data includes Linkert scales where respondents rank the extent of their agreement or disagreement with specific statements. **Qualitative data** included the comments to open-ended questions which were **analysed thematically**. The survey responses are helpful to provide insight into students' understanding of and their experience applying for the AAF. This information highlighted strengths and areas of improvement in the current AAF process.

² <https://www.theoryofchange.org/what-is-theory-of-change/>

Other Data – Staff experiences, discussions with colleagues, previous evaluations

Further information has been collated more indirectly by SU colleagues. These include interactions with students via emails or impromptu drop-ins, AIC and Accessibility and Inclusion Intern's experiences administrating the AAF, and previous evaluations of the scheme.

Measuring progress against Theory of Change outcomes

The above information is compared against the 24-25 TOC Model and consequently assisted in the development of the 25-26 ToC Model for the next cycle of this scheme (2025-2026).

Evaluating Overall Process and Timing

Overall Application Process

The application process remained mostly the same as the 23-24 year, consisting of three stages: Registering Interest Stage à Application Stage à Claiming Stage.

The continual increase in student demand for the fund necessitates inviting students in order of interest to submit an application. Despite lengthening some of the process, this is the main and most effective way **to better manage student expectations** of their opportunity of receiving the AAF. Therefore, continuation of this method is recommended to help manage student expectation of the fund.

AAF Interest Form

The main improvement to this form included the addition of the below:

- Selecting Yes for: *"I confirm that completion of this form does not guarantee an invitation to apply as the fund is limited."*
- Adding an **informative place counter** at the end of the form which stated, *"This interest form is submitted after **XXX** other students have submitted their interest"*.

The above additions ensured students were adequately aware **at the beginning** of the process how popular the form was and informed of their potential que position. This dramatically decreased student emails querying about not having been invited yet. This positive outcome is presumably shared with the use of Power Automate (see below).

AAF Application Form

Further improvements to the *JotForm* Application Form included the addition of a visual progress bar and the addition of a **PARTNERS option** which decreased the form length of the form.

A positive outcome included less queries from students reporting difficulties filling in the form. However, some students did still have issues filling in the form on campus – the reasons for this are still unclear.

PARTNERS Addition

The 2024-2025 year trialled a **new working partnership** between Newcastle University SU and the Newcastle University's PARTNERS team. This was implemented for various reasons.

Firstly, to **improve the students' experience** applying and to **lessen their burden** of providing evidence with their application. Secondly, students often provide evidence not specified in the eligibility criteria form, including death certificates, psychiatry reports and GP reports amongst other documents. As SU staff do not have the expertise to make eligibility decisions based on those documents, these often require follow ups requiring further evidence from students – this is not ideal for either party.

The success of working with other University team members to confirm students' eligibility combined with the fact that the **AAF eligibility mirrors PARTNERS eligibility**, it was envisioned that the option for the PARTNERS team to confirm their eligibility would streamline the process for both students and SU staff.

This partnership was felt to have worked well and achieved the above aims. Therefore, it is recommended to continue for the next implementation of the scheme. It is to be noted that there were two main issues highlighted. First, a handful of **SER assigned** students applied – these were students who went through "PARTNERS" but did not meet any Widening Participation criteria and are not classified as PARTNERS Students. More information can be read [here](#). Secondly, some students were **not assigned a PARTNERS** category on the University database but after investigation **were in fact PARTNERS students**. This can be speculated to be the result of the change in provider of the University's student data. However, this did not have any major impact **and was quickly resolved by working with the PARTNERS team**.

Postcode Issue

The Postcode eligibility remains the most difficult eligibility criteria for the SU to confidently confirm. This criterion also can change each year as the PARTNERs eligibility might change. Additionally, there is a delay in students who were successful based on their post code for a certain year and the updated accepted postcodes. For example, there was at least one student who the postcode checker stated was *Not Eligible* but was in fact eligible during their entry year, as confirmed by the PARTNERs team. Therefore, it should be explored *what LPN measures should be included* or whether it would be replaced by *confirmation of their PARTNERs student status* instead.

Disability Criteria

Despite the eligibility evidence document stating which documents are accepted for applying under the disability criteria, applications often included documents not accepted **including psychiatry or hospital disclosure forms and reports**. Therefore, it is recommended to **investigate** whether students provide consent for the SU to confirm their disability with a university disability practitioner as the main option for this eligibility criteria, with the additional documents of a DSA, PIP or medical evidence requested as a back-up.

Student Intern + AAF Delivery

The return of the *Accessibility and Inclusion Intern* positively contributed to the delivery of the scheme. For the seven “core” weeks of the scheme (16th September -1st November), the *Accessibility and Inclusion Intern* contributed **63 hours** to the delivery of the scheme and the *AIC* contributed approximately **134hrs**. This totals an approximate **~197 hours over 7 weeks**. The bulk of this time was spent on reviewing the applications themselves and SUMS activities (adding students to the SUMS group, Level 1 and Level 2 approvals etc). However, this did also include emailing students their que numbers, emailing *Postgraduate and/or international* students that they were ineligible, inviting students to apply, sending outcome emails, and answering general queries amongst others.

As the AAF is moving to a different permanent role for the rest of the 24/25 year, it is hoped that a student intern is not necessary for the core fund administration, but rather student voice could help guide the evaluation report through listening groups with committee or applicants etc.

Power Automate

The introduction of Power Automate proved **extremely helpful** in dramatically reducing workload burden of this scheme by sending the automated emails, automatic form downloads and the various mail merges required in the process. These all substantially improved the efficiency of the fund.

Data Sharing

This scheme is **an intervention set out by the University's APP** however, as a separate organisation, the SU does not have access to the data necessary for this process, for example UCAS application data, care-experienced/estranged status, disability status, etc. This can provide difficulties with implementing the fund as efficiently for students as possible. This is also **complicated by the different teams at the University** having **different data sharing restrictions** or **GDPR concerns**.

As confirming a students' eligibility for this fund falls within "the "students' best interests" ruling" some teams are happy to check eligibility while others require a back and forth with the student and to receive explicit written consent. Therefore, it is recommended that **a data sharing agreement for the purposes of this fund is drafted** for all the University teams to share students' eligibility for the fund to further streamline the process and ensure a better experience for the students. This *change would be highlighted to students*, so they are aware this data is being shared for this purpose only and how to get in contact if they want to withdraw their consent to this agreement.

SUMS Loyalty Programme and Direct Sports Centre Payments

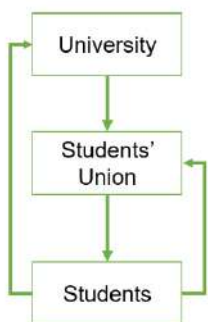


Figure 1 : Current funding pathway for the AAF

The funding is received from the University which is paid to students' directly to then go to the university sports team or back into the SU.

A big concern from higher senior colleagues is **whether the fund granted is indeed being used for the requested purposes**.

While following up with students with receipts is **not** recommended nor feasible, the way this fund is awarded is fairly inefficient (FIGURE 1)

An alternative allocation of funding **through a SUMS Loyalty Programme** for all SU based activities is encouraged to be explored. This loyalty programme was recently trialled for care-

experienced and estranged students' during Freshers week and therefore a potential option to explore.

Similarly, it could be recommended to pay the cheaper annual Sports Centre membership costs, directly to the Sports Centre. The annual membership costs instead of monthly direct debits would allow the funding to go a little bit further by **~£45, £35 or £40** per applicant, depending on the membership of choice³.

This is potentially also an attractive option to **bypass the time-consuming manual individual addition of each successful student to the AAF group and the approval processes on SUMS**. These are unable to be developed to be developed to be fit for purpose for the AAF.

The inefficient way of awarding funding is not isolated to NUSU. The AIC met with Manchester University Students' Union about their [Access to Recreation Grant](#) where they shared similar concerns about the inefficiency and cyclic nature of the funding. Therefore, it is recommended to look into the possibility of further streamlining the awarding process.

Clubs and Societies Expenses Form

The **Clubs and Societies Expenses form** was created by the AIC and shared with the Activities Team to encourage completion by committee members to showcase the *expected costs of their specific activities for the entire year*. While the Activities Team were unable to include this in outgoing committee handovers, the AIC shared this form at committee training and included it with various communications (on the webpage, at drop-ins, in emails etc.).

For the first year utilising this form, **164 expense documents** were received from about 66 different clubs and societies. This indicates this was positively received by students. A summary table of the core information for the expense forms received is found below, which provides valuable insight.

TABLE 4: A summary of the total estimated costs of membership, either competitive or non-competitive, for 66 clubs/societies. Costs are based upon the provided expense documents.

³ The 24-25 annual amounts for the Sports and Fitness, Fitness and Sports memberships are £205, £165 and £80 respectively whereas a monthly direct debit would cost an accumulative £250, £200 and £120 for **10 months** or £300, £240 and £144 for **12 months** respectively.

	Non-Competition (£)		Competition (£)	
Society/Club	New Member	Recurring Member	New Member	Recurring Member
Academic medicine	£5.00	£5.00		
Afro-Caribbean	£452.00	£452.00		
American Football	£450.00	£450.00		
Anaesthetics and critical care	£5.00	£5.00		
Arab	£153.00	£153.00		
Archery	£190.00	£175.00	£295.00	£280.00
Athletico medrid (intramural)	£520.00	£440.00		
Athletics and cross country	£261.60	£261.60	£517.40	£494.60
Biomedical society	£131.00	£131.00		
Board game	£45.00	£45.00		
Boat club			£1,346.00	£1,060.00
Boxing	£240.00	£180.00	£288.00	£208.00
Brazilian Jiu Jitsu	£160.00	£160.00	£320.00	£280.00
British sign language	£291.00	£381.00		
Canoe	£573.75	£573.75	£765.75	£625.75
Cheerleading Club	£400.00	£300.00	£490.00	£380.00
Chess	£65.00	£65.00	~£535.00	~£535.00
Climbing	£390.00	£390.00		
Dance	£202.00	£202.00	£347.46	£267.00
Debating	£5.00	£5.00		
Dentistry	£166.00	£137.00		
DJ society	£231.00	£231.00		
Dodgeball	£255.00	£240.00	£283.00	£240.00
European Law student's association	£135.00	£135.00	£295.00	£295.00
Fellwalking	£155.50	£155.50		
Figure skating	£600.00	£480.00		
Film	£59.00	£59.00		
Friends of MSF	£113.00	£113.00		
Futsal	£358.53	£260.00		

Gymnastics	£202.00	£202.00	£422.00	£422.00
Ice hockey	£1,041.00	£495.00	£1,106.00	£545.00
Islamic society	£473.00	£473.00		
Karate	£426.60	£392.60	£714.95	£621.90
Korfball	£153.00	£153.00	£246.80	£224.30
Ladies Hockey	£847.00	£707.00	£950.00	£717.00
Law society	£110.00	£110.00		
Marrow society	£87.40	£87.40		
Men's basketball	£605.00	£340.00	£625.00	£360.00
Men's rugby	£530.00	£430.00		
Newcastle Muslim Medics	£45.00	£45.00		
Netball Club	£655.00	£655.00		
NUTS	£356.40	£356.40		
Paediatric society	£105	£105		
Pole and aerial	£350.00	£215.00	£370	£235.00
Polo	£2,820.00	£2,820.00	£3,750.00	£3,655.00
Powerlifting and weightlifting club	£410	£410	£750	£750
Women's rugby	£422.00	£307.00	£450.00	£307.00
Running	£128.50	£113.50		
Social squash	£178.00	£178.00		
Surgical Society	£50.00	£30.00		
Swift Society	£239.62	£239.62		
Swimming Club	£260.00	£200.00	£380.00	£320.00
Taekwondo	£145.00	£145.00	£340.00	£325.00
Tamil and Malayali	£73.00	£73.00	£133.00	£113.00
Teddy bear	£5.00	£5.00		
Thai boxing	£708.00	£608.00		
Trampoline	£195.00	£195.00	£320.00	£320.00
Triathlon	£1230.00	£210.00	£1270.00	£210.00
Water polo	£530.50	£505.00		
We are donors	£5.00	£5.00		
Wheelchair basketball	£360.00	£360.00	£390.00	£390.00

Wilderness medicine	£239.00	£214.00		
Women's Cricket	£450.00	£300.00	£475.00	£325.00
Yoga	£328.00	£328.00		

To further confirm whether students found the expenses form helpful and to highlight areas of improvement, a survey question asked whether they made use of the *club and societies expenses form* in their application (FIGURE 2).

Did you make use of a club/society expenses document in your application?

127 Responses

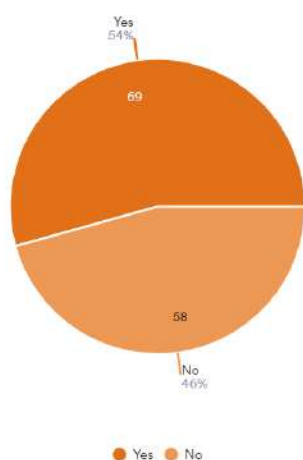


FIGURE 2: A donut chart breaking down how many student respondents used a club/society expense document within their application for the Fund.

A clear split between the students was identified. Those recipients that did not utilise the form (46%) elaborated that they (or their committee) were unaware of this document, or their chosen club or society did not fill it in. This

indicates further work on sharing and raising awareness of this form needs to be undertaken by the Activities Team.

Student comments are as follows:

- ***“Couldn’t find one, had to email the society”***
- ***“I’m not sure what this is”***
- ***“Wasn’t aware of them”***
- ***“I found it quite difficult to have societies complete the document in the required amount of time”***
- ***“Didn’t know where to get”***

Although some respondents indicated they did not require one of these forms as they “needed a sports and fitness membership rather than club/society [membership]”

Those recipients that did make use of the expenses form (54%) provided further comment to gather ideas for further improvement and to ensure they’re fit for purpose. The **responses were**

overall positive, with students indicating **how it made the process easier and more inclusive** and that they *felt they had more transparency and knowledge of the expected costs* required of them throughout the year.

Three of the provided comments are:

- ***“I did find them helpful for events that haven’t been advertised yet but do cost money.”***
- ***“Yes, showed me a rough idea of how much it costs so i could plan effectively”***
- ***“Yes the dance one was, I never received one for law.”***

Stigma/Disclosing Financial Hardship

One particular student indicated **how important it was for the Activities Team to encourage committee members to have their expenses form** on hand stating an improvement would be to, ***“encourage societies to have the completed clubs and societies expense form easily available (or make this mandatory) so that students applying to the fund don't have to disclose their financial circumstances to committee members, as they may embarrassed about having to ask for this, despite understood confidentiality.”***

This comment does highlight a **recurring theme noted in the survey response this year** – the stigma or embarrassment felt by students to disclose their financial situation, particularly to another student. For example, another student stated that they did not use this form as they ***“did not want to approach committee members and disclose any of my financial situation to them as that can be alienating and it is stressful to rely on students you don't know and have no stake in your finances to complete the form.”***

Another student commented that they did not make use of the form as they ***“didn’t want to burden the societies with things to do.”*** Further, another student indicated that the form was ***“a long document that was difficult to fill out and personally didn’t feel like was disability friendly.”***

These comments are a vital insight to guide further improvements of this rough form. It also **highlights the importance of having these documents easily accessible before the fund opens**, which was asked to happen through the support of the Activities Team and did not happen. It also highlights how important having committee member feedback and ideas in the

development of these initiatives are. A [survey](#) was created to gather committee members thoughts on this form and was shared with the Activities Manager. However, a response about the possibility of sharing this with committee members is yet to be received to date.

As another student highlighted below, **these documents are also important for students who don't apply to the fund** but still require the valuable information about the costs for a meaningful interaction within the club/society they want to be a part of.

- ***“They were helpful even if I didn't apply for the access fund as it was transparent and realistic on how much money is needed to be spend over the year in the society.”***

Optional Drop Ins and Attendance at Clubs & Societies Fair

The optional one-hour drop-ins for committee members were available after committee training and before the interest form opened while the optional 1-hour drop-ins for interested students were available slightly later. These were available for some in person support for committee members completing the *Clubs and Societies Expenses Document* or other questions they may have and any in-person support for interested students including filling out the form and answering any queries.

While the committee sessions were not too well attended, the other sessions were utilised by students more. One survey applicant also stated **that a way to improve the fund** would be to, *“Run the sessions to help you apply for the fund longer.”* Additionally, a visually impaired student found it helpful to complete the forms with the AIC to check all was in order before submitting the form. Therefore, for further inclusivity and accessibility, having this in-person option (or similar) available for students is worth continuing.

Furthermore, the attendance of the AIC at the *Clubs & Societies Fair* was helpful to provide immediate answers to queries from new students about how to afford the activities available to them. However, a lot of these students were new Postgraduate or International Students who would be ineligible and have no alternative available to them. Despite this, for completeness and to help new students, **having this option available for students is worth continuing.**

Evaluating Knowledge, Purpose and Understanding

Students Understanding and Expectations

The thorough and timely publication of **information on the website** with the launch and success of a **new clearer name** contributed to improving students' understanding about the purpose of the AAF.

- ***“I think the previous name confused me on its purpose and what it could be used for but the change of name has clarified things.” 24-25 Survey Respondent***

The addition of **automatic responses**, facilitated by Power Automate, ensured students were informed in a timely manner of their status, where they were in the queue and about next steps in the application process.

Furthermore, hosting **drop-in sessions**, highlighting the fund at **committee training** and at the *clubs and societies fair* helped answer general queries quickly in a manner students could engage with. These all contributed to the dramatic positive increase in the number of **students correctly filling out the form** and a **dramatic decrease in the number of students emailing queries**.

Knowledge of the AAF's Purpose

It is quite important that students understand *why* the fund exists and *why* the eligibility criteria are set to access the fund. For example, when asked to **explain what they believe the AAF's purpose to be**, some survey respondents commented the purpose more clearly and mentioned aspects of equity, reducing barriers and widening access:

- ***“To create equity, for those who may have a characteristic which prevents them from otherwise accessing activities to the same extent as those without.”***
- ***“It's to reduce barriers in further education. No one should have to feel left out of joining and participating in societies which make up a major network for most people which people from widening backgrounds statistically lack. It also removes the stigma of not being able to do stuff because we can't afford it or make it less important.”***

- ***“I believe the purpose of the fund is to support university students with costs that will enrich their university experience such as gym memberships and society memberships. It is very important to have that fund there for those who struggle financially and face barriers to social activities at university.”***
- ***“Widen access to activities, societies, and other events on campus to allow people who are at a possible disadvantage to make connections, meet new people, and feel a sense of community at Newcastle University.”***
- ***“It served to help people afford club activities that are from disadvantaged/minority groups. To increase their representation in clubs/activities”***

However, these responses were in the **minority**. Many other survey respondents indicate a **more general understanding** of the importance of extracurricular activities and financial difficulties for **all** students in accessing these opportunities, rather than understanding that this fund exists to further support access and participation for students from a widening participation background:

- ***“To help students use it for social activities so that they can get more involved with the university”***
- ***“Removes the burden of students to find extra work just for societies and events.”***
- ***“It aims to allow the opportunity to support people to not be restricted with the society or sports that they do and to feel more a part of the university”***
- ***“to make taking part in societies and student experiences more affordable”***
- ***“Give people money who need to into participate in activities that will improve their uni life and studies”***
- ***“To give money to help individuals to participate in clubs and society’s”***
- ***“To allow students to access extra curricular activities”***
- ***“To allow students to socialise and get fit without worrying about not being able to pay bills”***
- ***“To overcome the financial difficulties associated with attending and participating in clubs, societies, and activities run by the university!”***

Therefore, the survey indicates that the **AAF purpose and knowledge of the fund's limitation** is still not accurately conveyed, the ToC Inputs and Outcomes are not met (see ToC 24-25 Model) and this requires further work.

Evaluating Communication

Timeline Implemented and Communicated

This year, a timeline was created which highlighted important dates and steps for groups of students, including dates of partnership work with the PARTNERS team. Despite some slight deviations to this plan, this method worked well and allowed the fund to be fully allocated by the first few days in November 2024, **the fastest yet**.

While the exact dates were *not communicated directly to students*, the general information about the timings between specific dates and stages in the process were. For example, when the interest form would open (12PM on 19th September), the time students have to complete their application form (~5-7 calendar days), the time they will expect to hear a response from the team (~7 working days after their application deadline) etc.

As the start of term is incredibly busy and the nature of the Welfare and Support Centre (where the AIC is based) is unpredictable, it was decided not to share these dates directly with students in preparation of unexpected situations where these dates would need to be slightly shifted and it would cause confusion. The **clear communication about the process** and informing students of their place in the que helped manage their expectations and lessened the volume of queries to the team compared to previous years.

However, despite a fairly fast turnaround, the pressure on students from the Sports Centre and Clubs to have their memberships by October remains a big concern with applicants stating, “I think the fund was well run, **it would be nicer if the process could be faster though, as some clubs prefer their fees paid sooner rather than later.**”

There is a fine balance between opening the scheme early enough for students to access to pay for their fees and for them to have their necessary documents, which often aren't available at that time. The **Opportunity Scholarship** remains a criterion that makes this balance more difficult as articulated in the following comment:

- “I was asked for evidence of receiving the Opportunity Scholarship in the year I was applying for the Activities Access Fund, however at that point I hadn't received any Opportunity fund, nor an entitlement letter.”24-25 Survey Respondent

The AAF cannot realistically be open before the *Clubs & Societies Fair* to remain fair to students. Although, **the lack of flexibility surrounding sports centre membership and other club, or society memberships** requires thought and input from **senior colleagues in those departments**.

Website and Information

A new webpage was launched this year dedicated to the AAF – nusu.co.uk/funds. This contained a thorough explanation of the fund, what activities it covers, what to expect from each stage of the process, next steps after students registering interest, available drop ins for students and committee members as well as the evaluation reports. This satisfied the recommendations of previous reports.

There are however still further areas of improvement, particularly as the webpage is lengthy. These include **implementing subsections or more user-friendly navigations** on this page as well as **a general overview page** linking the various financial support options available.

Guidance Documents

The **eligibility document** included two new flowcharts which explained the process and the initial eligibility (*Home Fees* and *Undergraduate Student*). These appear to have been positive received by the students as there were less queries of this nature. It can be speculated that **the rebrand** of this fund as solely for UG, Home Students also helped clearly communicate this change to students. This document also included the addition of being eligible based on being a PARTNERS Student.

Additionally, both a downloadable **FAQ document** and an **online FAQ Microsoft Sway** was available to help answer any further questions.

Both the ***Clubs and Societies Expenses Document*** as well as the **Intramural Document** (approved by the Sports Centre) were available on the webpage as well. 164 *Club and Society*

Expense Documents and *22 Intramural Documents* were received. This is a positive outcome for the first iteration of these documents.

Importantly, the above *information being available and at a timely manner was achieved* which ensured the fund could be as transparent as possible. This was particularly important as for the 24-25 year, the fund was only available to Home Undergraduate Students. Despite filming various **explainer videos** over the 2024 summer, they were unable to be uploaded to the webpage. To further increase accessibility, this option should be further explored in the next iteration of the scheme.

Advertising

The majority of students found out about the AAF through **Word of Mouth (35%)** and through their **club or society (21%)**. Interestingly though, 11% of responses indicated they found out through the PARTNERS Scheme (FIGURE 3).

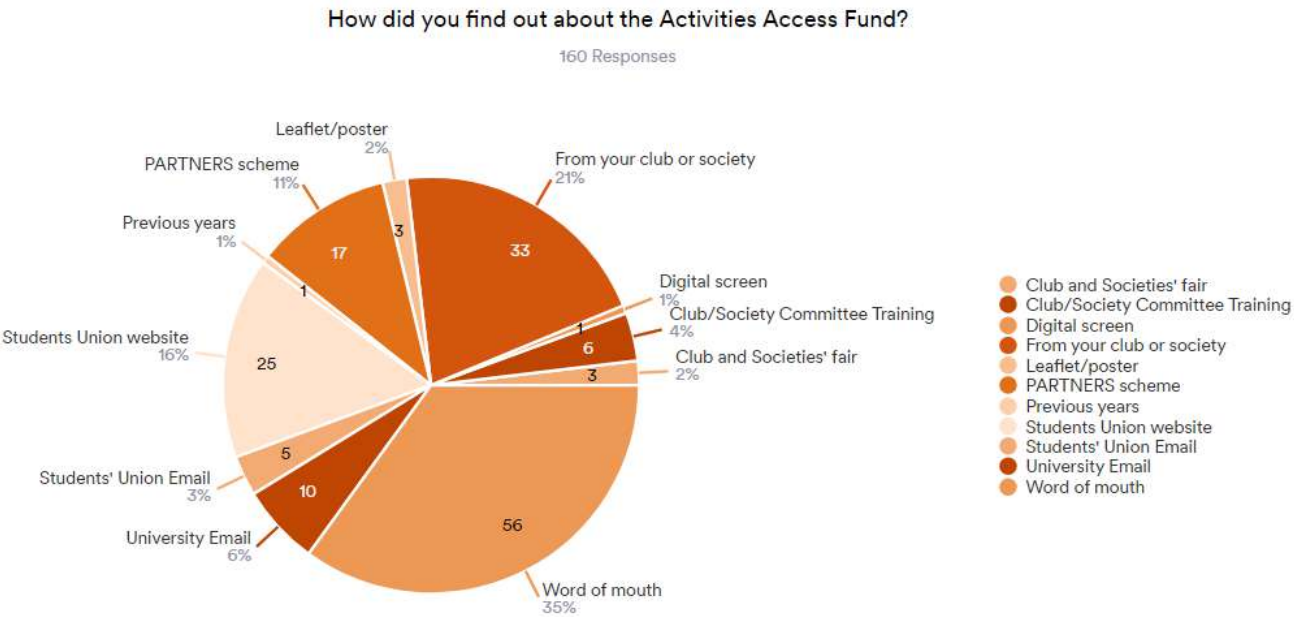
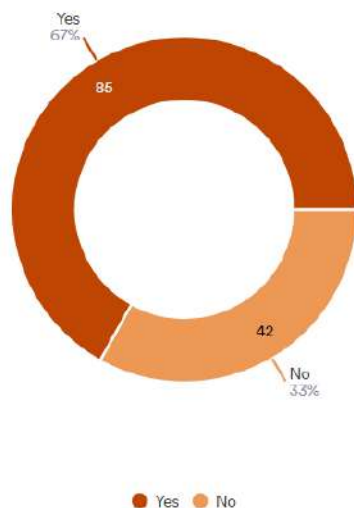


FIGURE 3: A pie chart displaying the various avenues through which students found out about the Activities Access Fund 2024 - 2025. Multiple advertisement avenues could have been selected at once.

Do you think the Fund was adequately advertised?
127 Responses



33% of survey respondents stated the fund was not adequately advertised (FIGURE 4).

When asked to elaborate on their responses, survey respondents indicated that **luck** and **word of mouth** were behind them finding out about the fund and applying. This indicates *Risk 1* and *Assumption 1* of the ToC 24-25 Model was not met.⁴

FIGURE 4: A donut chart displaying the proportion of students who thought the Fund was/was not adequately advertised for the 2024 - 2025 academic year.

Survey respondents indicated that to ensure students were aware of the fund dedicated emails should be sent to eligible students and particularly for the PARTNERS and Opportunity Scholarship team to let them know about this support. They also reiterated the importance of highlighting the AAF at *committee training* and the *Clubs and Society Fair*.

- ***“Personally I was only made aware of the fund in my third year at the university and primarily heard it via word of mouth so maybe direct contact with students that are able to use the fund would encourage involvement”***
- ***“To inform students about this, it maybe should be mentioned, at the clubs/society fair (could be a desk dedicated to financial help etc), also you could make sure that clubs/societies, make their members aware that this is available.”***

More than half of the survey respondents had not applied for this support in the past (55%). The reasons below indicate there is **some further work on communicating about the fund** to be undertaken:

- 49% indicated they were not aware of this support before this year
- 38% indicated they were not a student before this year
- 7% indicated they were not aware they were eligible

⁴ See ToC 24-25 Model for further details`

Evaluating Received Applications

Evidence-Based Applications

While the lack of tiers in the evidence-based applications did increase some workload associated with the fund in the 23-24 year, the introduction of both *Power Automate* and the *Clubs and Societies Expenses Document* for the **24-25 year** have mitigated some of the workload associated with the fund. The evidence-based method works well to **ensure each student receives the correct amount of funding**. Additionally, this encourages **students to budget** their expenses for the full academic year. As there are an infinite number and combinations of activities a student can choose to get involved in, tiers are not recommended to be re-introduced and rather *it is recommended to continue* with the *evidence-based application* approach.

Kit and Equipment

4.15% of applicant requests were for **equipment** while **7%** of applicant requests were for **kit**. It is important to note that often these were **often integral to the club or society**, for example Tennis Rackets for *Tennis Club* or *Social Tennis Society* or a suture kit for *Surgical Society*.

Additionally, there was **a range of prices for the same item** amongst individual applications. Furthermore, most student bought their items online from platforms including Amazon although some bought them second hand from platforms such as Vinted.

It is recommended that **necessary equipment and kit** can be brought through the SU webpage with committee members organising bulk orders or returning equipment. Committee members organise merchandise or kit normally, therefore this utilises what is already offered further. Additionally, if the fund changes to the loyalty scheme (see above), this will allow a **much smoother transition** for recipients to receive kit much quicker. Furthermore, it provides a fuller picture to analyse data on what recipients spend their allocated funds on.

Quality vs Quantity

Applicants requested funding mainly for club or society memberships (32.5%) and for the *Sports and Fitness Sports Centre Membership* (16.7%) as seen in **Table 1**.

While most applicants requested funding for 1-5 memberships (91.3%), there were some applicants who requested funding **for a large quantity of clubs or societies**. For example, there were students who requested funding for **23, 21, 20, 19 and 18 club/society memberships** (TABLE 5). Approximately 8.7% of the requested funding was for more than 5 activities.

Realistically, a student would not be able to fully engage with that quantity of clubs and societies chosen in their application. However, as a student they might not be aware of the **additional costs associated**, and they may want to join as many as possible.

Therefore, it is recommended that thought (**and potentially student consultation**) explores whether the AAF should introduce a limit on **the number of activities chosen**. Alternatively, it could explore ways to ensure the **quality of the activities chosen is focused on rather than the quality**. This also further supports the recommendation (see above) that the total costs expected for each activity are clear, accessible and shared with all students.

TABLE 5: The number of club/society memberships that 493 students requested and utilized the Fund for.

Quantity of Clubs/Society Memberships	% of Applicants
1-5	91.3
6-10	6.7
11-15	1.0
18-23	1.0

Rejected Requests

The two main requests that were rejected were for *Female Only Gyms* for religious reasons and for *MedSoc* memberships or activities such as NAMS or Kenton netball or MedSoc Hockey.

While these requests are not in line with the goals of the fund, it does raise further questions about what is available for these students.

Medical and Dental Students

A SUMS report on the demographics of the AAF applicants for the 24-25 year was created. This revealed that *Medical* (31.4%) and *Dental* Students (14.6%) made up **nearly half of the AAF applicants** (46%). Stage 3 and 4 students were the most abundant for both Medical and Dental applicants but included students in all stage (1-5).

The SU has a wide range of societies available with a fair number of specific medical societies. Further information from both groups about their chosen activities can be found below (TABLE 6):

TABLE 6: The clubs and societies that medical and dental students tend to mention within their application.

	Medical	Dental
<i>Top Club/Societies</i>	Newcastle Muslim Medical Sciences Society Surgical Society Emergency Medicine Society	Dentistry Society Arab Society
<i>Total Numbers</i>	333 members across 100 different clubs/societies	66 members across 28 different clubs/societies

A particular trend noticed in the application from **medical students** is their request to fund travel to Newcastle for club/society activities if **they are on placements away from Newcastle** but still want to get involved in the club or society. While currently within the scope of the fund, it does raise the question of whether this is something to continue being offered in this fund.

Sense of belonging and inclusion is important for students of all stages, and **travel can be a big barrier** with current public transport prices and the need to travel to campus at least twice a week. However, it is recommended that a discussion about what the fund should be used for in the current climate and whether the travel costs should be covered by alternative providers, for example, the Medical School and how that is achieved.

Sports Centre and Intramural Applications

2.77% of applicant requests were to fund Intramural. As Intramural is often marketed as a **cheaper alternative** to the more expensive extracurricular activities at the SU (TABLE 5), it is worth investigating whether this should be included in the funding or if the focus of the AAF should be on the more expensive activities.

Similarly, there were **12 applications** that **only requested gym access** i.e., *the Fitness Sports Centre Membership*. While this has been supported as it **aligns** with the sense of belonging and inclusion in the overall student community by encouraging use of the University Sports Centre, a lot of the applications mention **accessing the gym mainly to help with their mental health**. This theme is not restricted to these applications however does raise the question of whether these applications should continue to be supported or whether there should be **a separate provision** to support students access to non-counselling support for their mental health. Considerations need to be had about balancing being too prescriptive and being pragmatic with the spending of the fund.

Evaluating Funding

Maximum Amount Uplift

The maximum amount for the 24-25 year increased from £280 to £350 (25% increase), in line with requests from the previous two years' reports. However, it is noted that this might not go very far, particularly for some sports clubs and competition activities. Some other Students' Unions have a maximum of £500 per academic year in a similar grant and **some students did indicate more funding would be more impactful, particularly for sport and competitions**.

Responses to note are:

- ***“Increase the funding limit: £350 is helpful, but some students, especially those with additional costs may still struggle. A slightly higher amount like £500 might provide more meaningful support for those in need.”***
- ***“The amount the club costs per year is around the 600 mark, however, this is for socials and kit, which aren't 'essential' to the club. Everything essential was covered which is the main purpose I believe.”***
- ***“I am part of the boat club which is a very expensive sport. Membership alone is £350 (the amount i received) with an extra £205 for the sports and fitness***

membership and then other costs associated with Kit, transport, and going away for competitions”

- *“I think that there should be a higher amount accessible for uni sport's society's that play bucs. The only fund covered my gym/sport/netball membership fee but then there's other fees like buying equipment to pay for it and arranging transport and train tickets when the uni don't arrange transport for us”*
- *“My breakdown of costs amounted to £425 so this amount would have been sufficient for my society which was climbing, sports tend to have higher financial commitments.”*

Other comments highlight that student are aware the fund is limited to help more students:

- *“There was a still a lot of the cost that I had to cover myself which I really struggled to do so because the total cost of my activity was a lot more than the max amount to be given. However, I understand that in order to help a lot of people there needs to be a max amount but I still felt like I had to limit myself to only join one team.”*
- *“The fund has allowed me to join the gym, a sports club and has funded my academic society winter ball. However, there are still events I now can't afford to go to such as the summer ball or weightlifting competitions”*

90% of survey respondents indicated some level of agreement that the **money received was sufficient** (FIGURE 5). This is an increased from the 83% agreement of 23-24. Moreover, students' disagreement that the fund was sufficient decreased from 10% to 8%. Additionally, almost half (47%) of the survey respondents who agree the funding is sufficient, were allocated amounts surpassing £280 (FIGURE 6). Therefore, this uplift was warranted due to the continual increasing of costs associated with extracurricular activities (TABLE 4)

The above comments necessitate the need to investigate the costs of sports before implementing a further increase in AAF for students partaking in sports. It is not recommended to increase the individual fund limit and rather **work is required in managing the overall cost expected of all students** and increasing financial accessibility of Newcastle University's SU activities. Therefore, the AAF would remain as an option for those students who do not have the equal opportunity to access SU or University activities, rather than being viewed as a necessity for any student to be able to get involved.

Some examples include exploring alternatives such as tiered memberships, tiered ticketing to events through encouraging committee members to use the Inclusivity awards to subsidise these costs or exploring club discounts for external venue costs.

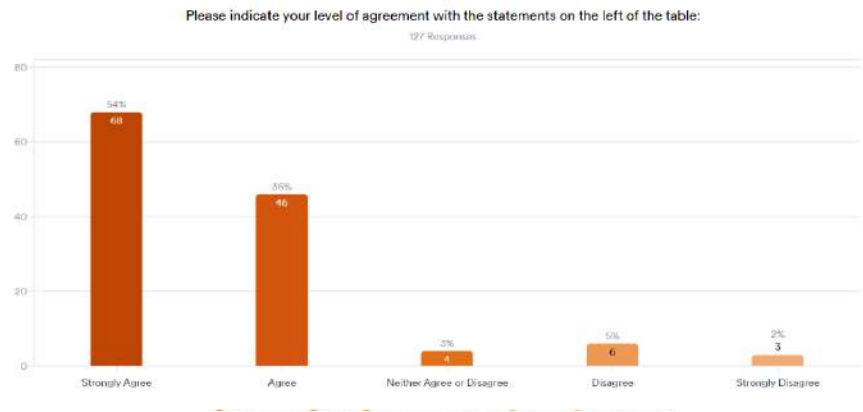


FIGURE 5: Column chart indicating student's level of agreement with the statement, 'The amount of money received was sufficient for me to comfortably afford the activities at the Students' Union.'

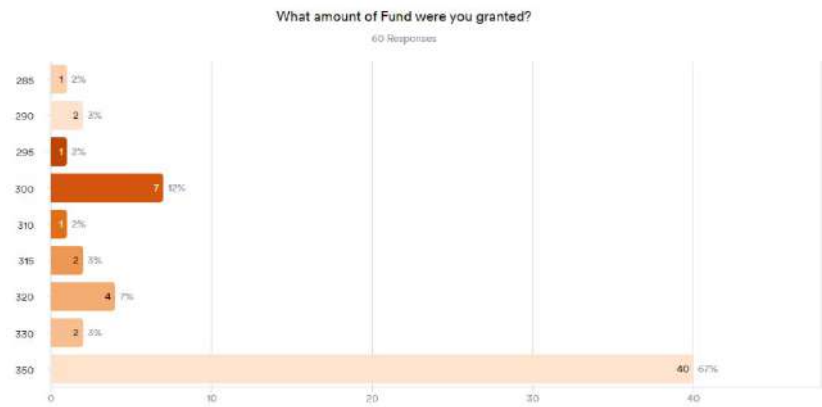


FIGURE6: A bar chart showing the respondents who were granted more than £280. This chart represents 60 students from 127 total respondents.

Sliding Scale

The 23-24 report recommended the implementation of a sliding scale for students whose costs dramatically exceeded the maximum £350. However, in practice this was difficult to be implemented, with most students expecting to spend more than £350 in the academic year (TABLE 4). This **could still be an option in future** years, however, the practicalities of how this would be implemented needs further thought and investigation. For example, perhaps considering which criteria or how many criteria a student meets or specific details in their written explanation that would warrant a further amount.

Evaluating Students' Experience

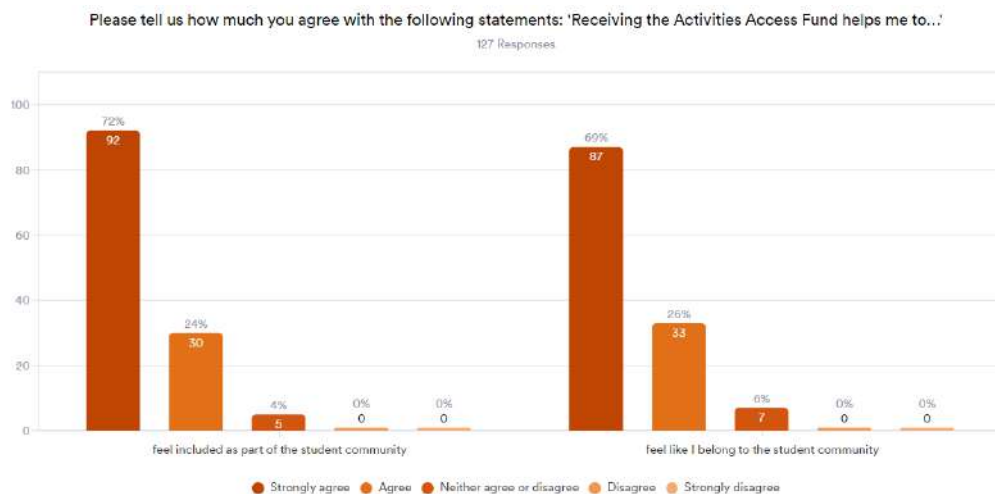
Contributing To Sense of Belonging

The Activities Access Fund is necessary in helping underrepresented students in maintaining a sense of belonging. This has both been shown before and continues to be shown.

95% of students indicated some level of agreement that receiving the AAF allowed them **to feel they belong in the student community** (FIGURE 7). This is an increase in agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (92%).

96% of students indicated some level of agreement that receiving the AAF allowed them to **feel included as part of the student community** (FIGURE 7). This is an increase in agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (94%).

FIGURE 7: A chart to show the impact of the Fund on student's sense of belonging, visualized through agreement with the statements, 'Receiving the Activities Access Fund helps me to feel included as part of the student community.' and 'Receiving the Activities Access Fund helps me to feel like I belong to the student community.'



98% of students indicated some level of agreement that receiving the AAF allowed them **to feel more satisfied with their student life** (FIGURE 8). This is in line with the agreement of the 23-24 survey respondents (98%).

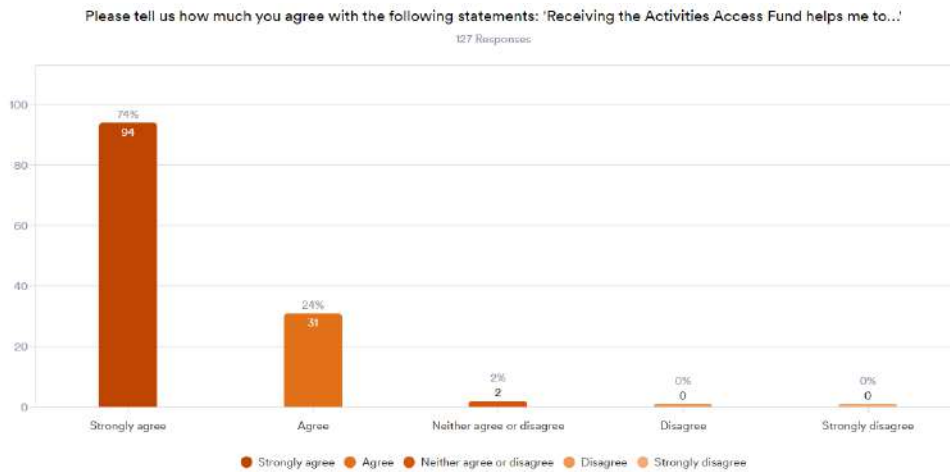


FIGURE 8: A column chart of Activities Access Fund's contribution to student satisfaction. This contribution is shown through agreement or disagreement with the statement, 'Receiving the Activities Access Fund helps me to feel more satisfied with my life as a student.'

92% of students indicated some level of agreement that receiving the AAF allowed them **take part in social activities** (FIGURE 9). This is an increase in agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (89%).

98% of students indicated some level of agreement that receiving the AAF allowed them **to meet people and make new friends** (FIGURE 9). This is an increase in agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (94%)

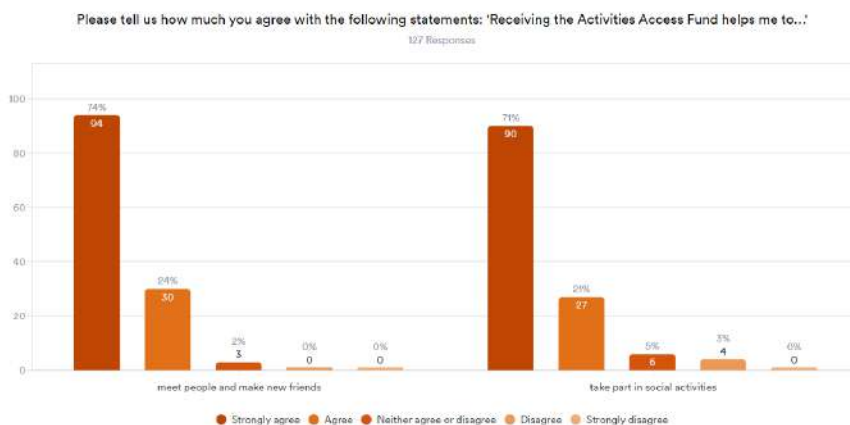


FIGURE 9: A column chart displaying student's ability to socialise as a result of the Fund. This is shown through their level of agreement with the statements, 'Receiving the Activities Access Fund helps me to meet people and make new friends.' and 'Receiving the Activities Access Fund helps me to take part in social activities.'

The AAF survey asked recipients to reflect on *how the AAF made a positive impact on their university experiences*. The responses were analysed thematically, and the following were the reported top responses along with a chosen comment:

- Making **connections/Friends or sense of community** and belonging – 19%
 - *“I felt much more included in the university experience- truly thankful and grateful for such a fund being established”*

- **Allowed** them to get involved – 18%
 - *“I'm able to afford to be a part of my sports club and pay the sports and fitness membership without having to worry about not having sufficient funds to properly fuel myself and get to and from training and races meaning I've been able to progress through the club and get fitter and stronger. It also means I'm able to be socially involved outside of the club, improving my uni experience and wellbeing”*
- **Decreased financial** worries, including reporting less pressure to find work or work more hours – 16%
 - *“It has taken so much pressure off of me, I already have to get a part time job to afford to pay my bills therefore this meant I now have times in the week where I can give myself some well needed physical self-care”*
- **Joining** a sports team – 13%
 - *“I do a sport both inside and outside of term time, however **the fees to attend the university club are nearly double what I pay to attend when I'm at home** (the sessions are also shorter at university), so the access fund helps to mitigate the massive increase in cost.”*

Other responses included mentioning the *mental health impact* (11%) and *Physical Health and Wellbeing* (11%). Some comments include:

- *“The Activities Access Fund significantly and positively impacted my university experience by enabling my participation in the Pole and Aerial Society. Being part of this community was transformative for my mental health, particularly in managing OCD, anxiety, and depression.”*

Contributing To Student Success and Progression

Leadership

Only **24%** of survey respondents indicated they **currently hold a Leadership position** as defined in the survey⁵ and **38%** indicated they **would take up a leadership position** in the following year.

⁵ Leadership position here is defined as being a president, treasurer, secretary or welfare officer of a club or society, a lead volunteer, a Liberation officer, course/school/ community/EDI rep etc

When asked to explain their choice of not seeking a leadership position, **24%** indicated they would not be current students i.e. currently final year, will be on placement etc. However, the remaining comments are broken down below:

- 26% indicated they would not due to **time pressure**.
- 9.5% indicated they would not as their current workload is too much/have a busy course.
- 9.5% indicated they would not as the leadership positions have too much pressure or responsibility associated with them.
- 5.3% indicated they were not interested.
- 5.3% indicated they were not confident in doing the role.

Contributing To Easing the Cost of Living

- 97% of students indicated some level of agreement that they **were concerned about the cost of extracurricular activities before receiving the AAF** (FIGURE 10). This is a decrease in agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (99%). It should be noted that two students did not respond to this question and therefore, this decrease could reflect that.

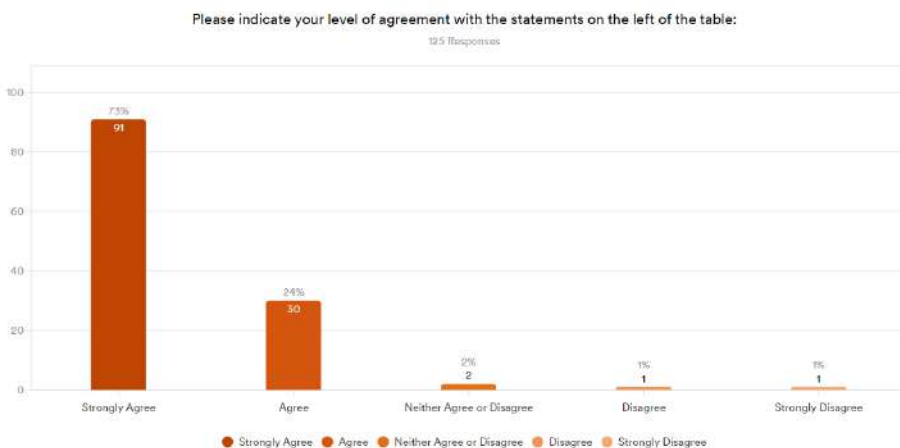


FIGURE 10: A column chart showing student's level of agreement with the statement, 'Before receiving the Activities Access Fund, I was concerned about the costs of extracurricular activities.' The chart is representative of 125 students.

- 89% of students indicated some level of agreement that the **AAF was necessary for their engagement with extracurricular activities** (FIGURE 11). This is a decrease in agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (92%).

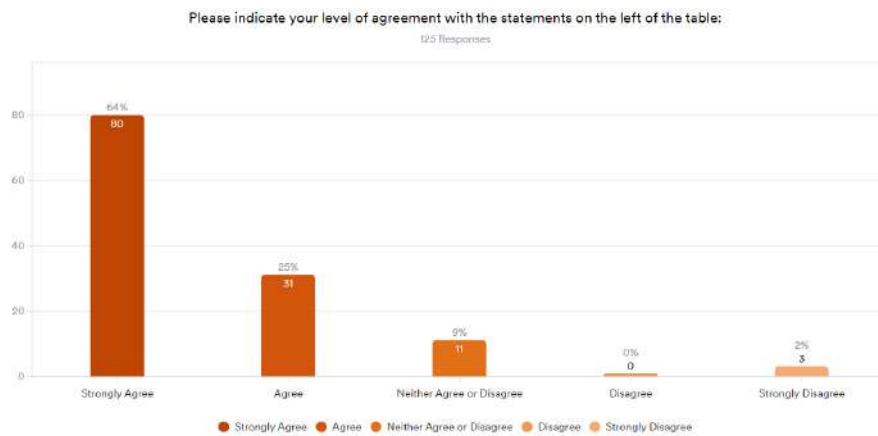


FIGURE 11: Column chart of the percentage of student respondents who agree/disagree with the statement, 'The Activities Access Fund was necessary for me to engage with activities at the Student's Union.' Figure represents 125 responses.

- As previously stated, 90% of students indicated some level of agreement that **the money received was sufficient** (FIGURE 5). This is an increase in agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (83%), which could be due to the increase in a maximum amount.
- 88% of students indicated some level of agreement that after receiving the AAF, **they felt less concerned about the cost of extracurricular activities** (FIGURE 12). This is a dramatic decrease in agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (97%), which can be speculated to be the result of continual financial concerns in the current financial climate.

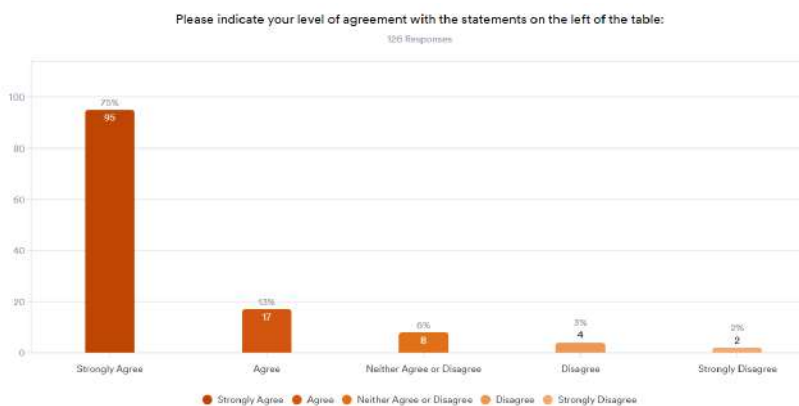


FIGURE 12: A column chart showing the level which student respondents agree/disagree with the statement, 'After receiving the Activities Access Fund, I felt less concerned about the costs of extracurricular activities.' The chart is representative of 126 obtained responses.

- 98% of students indicated some level of agreement that receiving the AAF helped them **afford to participate along with their fellow students** (FIGURE 13). This is in line with the 23-24 survey respondents' agreement (98%), which further supports the necessity of the AAF in the current financial climate.

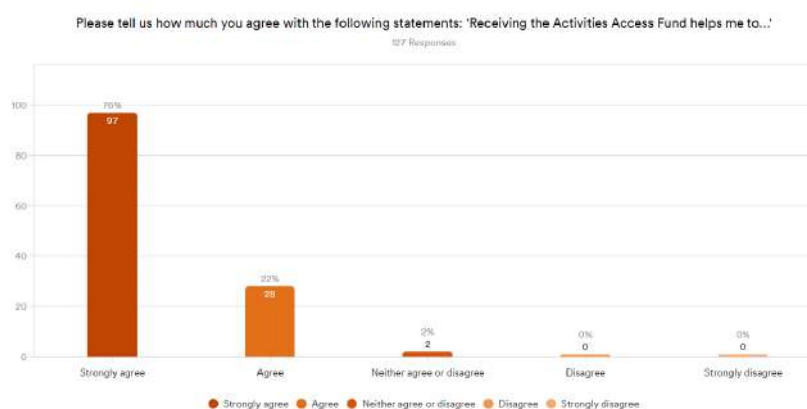


FIGURE 13: A column chart showing respondents level of agreement with the statement 'Receiving the Activities Access Fund helps me to afford to participate along with my fellow students.'

- 97% of students indicated some level of agreement that receiving the AAF **allowed them to concentrate on gaining new experiences without worrying about finances** (FIGURE 14). This is an increase in agreement from the 23-24 survey (94%), which further supports the necessity of the AAF in the current financial climate.

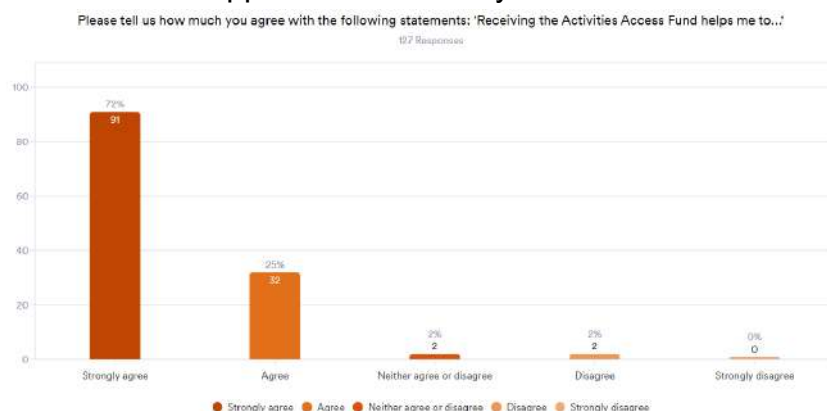


FIGURE 14: A column chart of students' agreement with the statement, 'Receiving the Activities Access Fund helps me to be able to concentrate on gaining new experiences without worrying about finances.'

The AAF survey asked recipients to reflect on *what was their biggest concern cost wise, before receiving the AAF*. The responses were analysed thematically, and the following were the reported top responses along with a chosen comment:

- Sports Centre Membership – 28%
- Membership – 22%
- Social Costs/Events – 9%figure

Other responses included *Kit* (7%), *Society Costs* (6%), *Equipment* (5%) and *Travel* (5%) amongst others. This aligns with what they requested funding for (Table 1)

Contributing To Health and Wellbeing

- 96% of students indicated some level of agreement that receiving the AAF **improved their health or wellbeing** (FIGURE 15). This is a slight, insignificant decrease in

agreement compared to the 23-24 survey respondents (97%). However, the AAF is still considered beneficial to wellbeing.

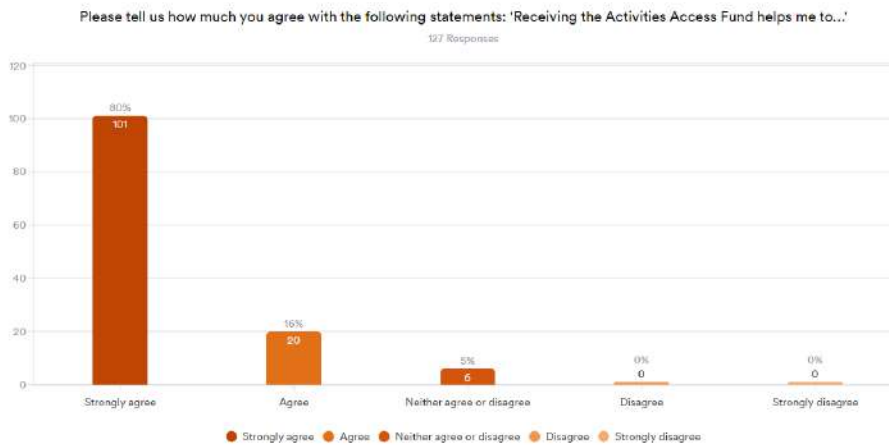


FIGURE 15: A column chart of the Fund's contribution to student well-being. This is shown through level of agreement with the statement, 'Receiving the Activities Access Fund helps me to improve my health or well-being.'

Student Recommendation

Those who would recommend left comments such as:

- “I would definitely recommend it. It helped me meet lots of people and improve my fitness. I would not have been able to do what I've done without it.”
- “I would recommend it as it really did reduce stress levels for me. Financial stress is something a lot of people go through so having this fund provided by the university really does make a difference in the student experience.”
- “I would recommend it as it strongly impacted on my ability to participate in NUSU extracurricular.”

Conclusion

Thorough evaluation of the AAF has recognised the importance of this funding in increasing student participation in extracurriculars - regardless of students' Fee status or Stage of Study. Not only does it aid in increasing participation in extracurriculars, but it has shown to improve student wellbeing, sense of belonging and connection and decreases financial concerns.

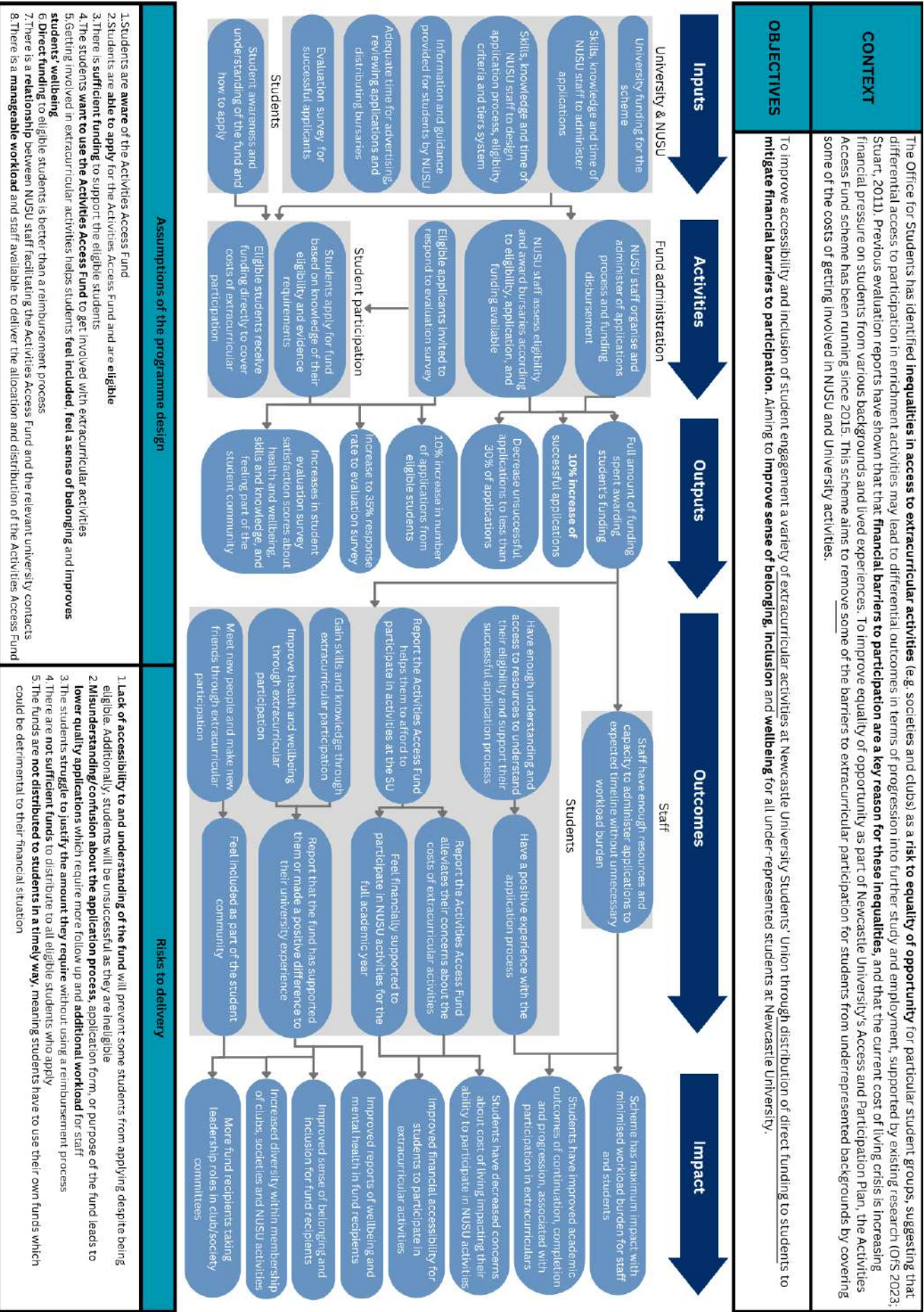
The addition of Power Automate and partnership with the PARTNERS team was vital to managing the workload and efficiency of this scheme but there is still further work to be completed in this area, particularly looking at SUMS improvements and utilising an even more direct allocation method.

Areas of specific concern remain the uncapped society and club annual increases increasing dependence on this fund and the lack of support available to committee members to provide transparent and accessible cost breakdowns of individual club and societies

While continually beneficial, some areas of concern have been highlighted and should be addressed in the next year of implementation

Theory of Change for 2025-2026

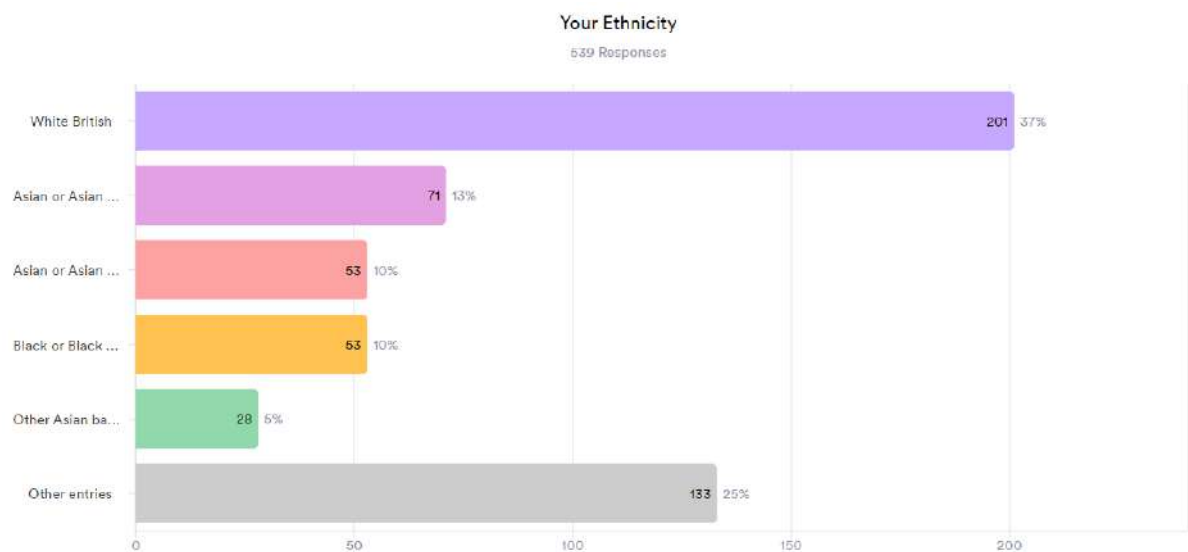
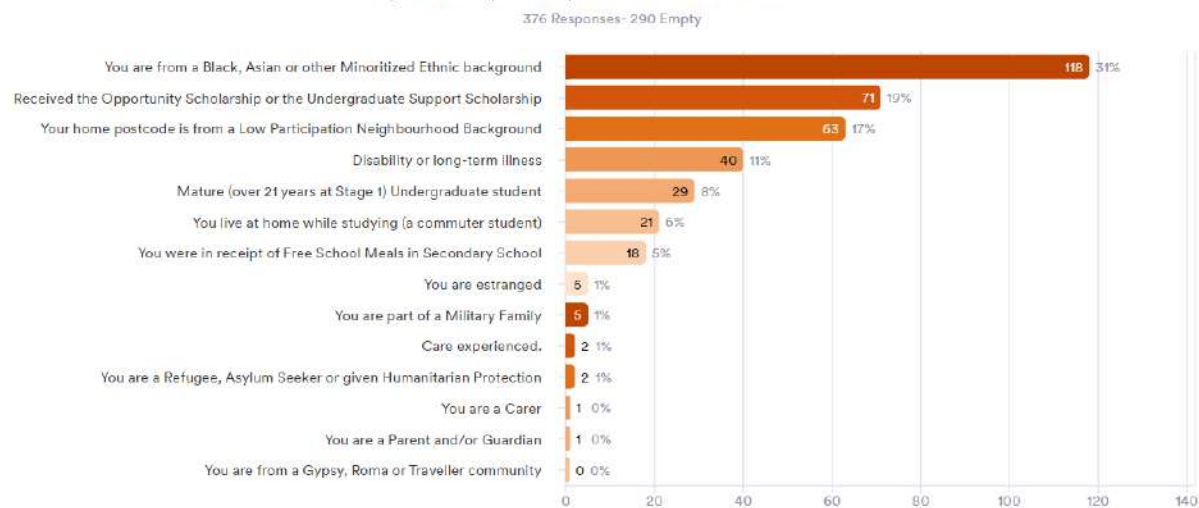
The updated ToC Model for the 25-26 year can be found below – slight edits have been made to reflect the aspects which were not met indicating areas to focus on.



Appendices

Appendix 1 – Application Information Breakdown

Please select on which basis you are applying for the fund. Please note you only need to meet 1 of the criteria. If you select more than one, you'll be required to provide evidence for each one.



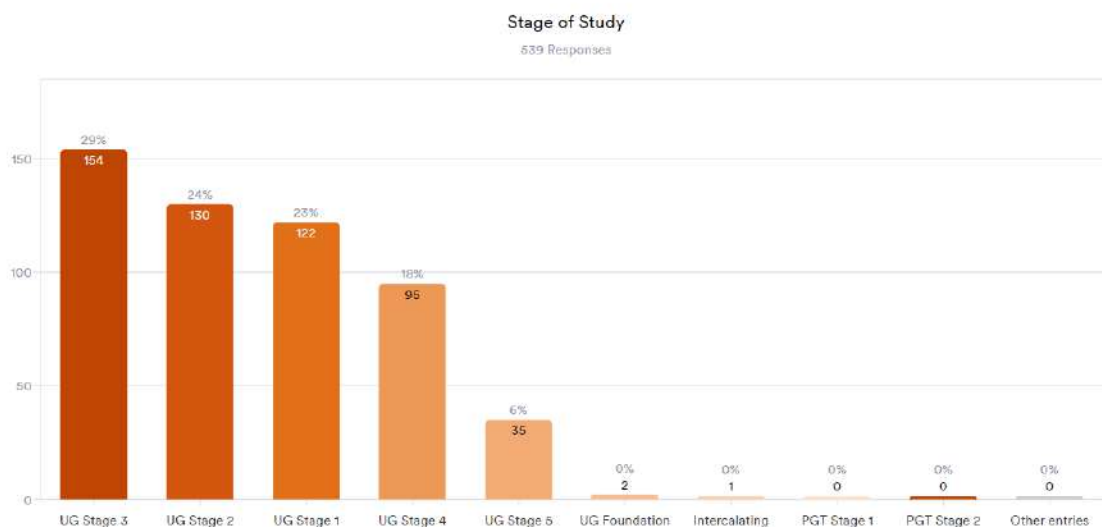
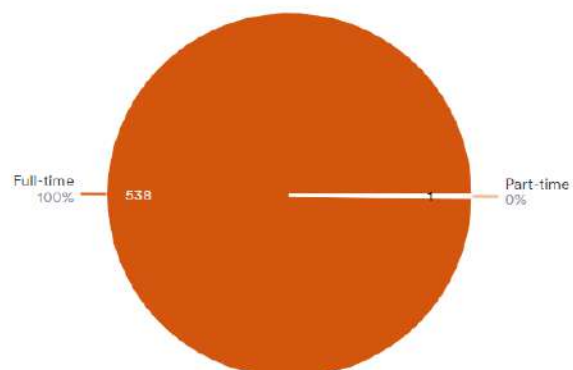


TABLE 1: Total number/percentage of successful applicants per stage of study.

Stage of Study	Total Number of Students	Percentage of Total Applicants
UG Stage 3	154	28.6
UG Stage 2	130	24.1
UG Stage 1	122	22.6
UG Stage 4	95	17.6
UG Stage 5	35	6.5
UG Foundation	2	0.4
Intercalating	1	0.2

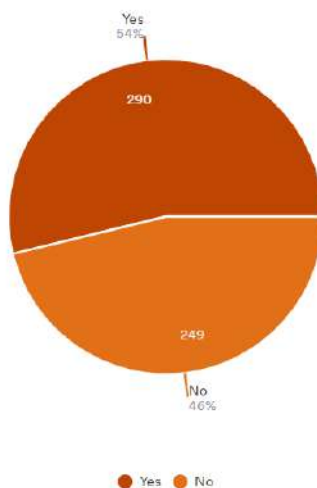
Mode of Study

539 Responses



Did you go through the PARTNERS scheme as a Widening Participation Student?

539 Responses



Appendix 2 – AAF Survey Demographic Breakdown

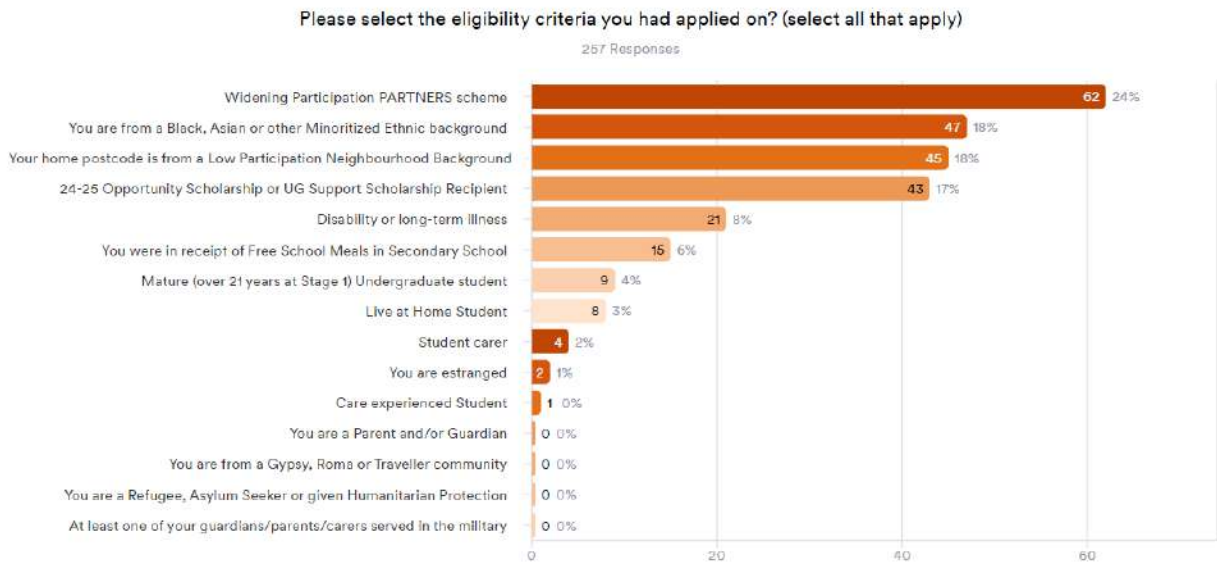


FIGURE: A bar chart of the respondents' chosen and approved eligibility criteria.

