



University of Wolverhampton Students' Union

Strategic Plan

2021-2024

Proudly Wolverhampton. Inspiring and empowering all students get the best out of university and life.

Introduction

A message from our President, 2021-22

The University of Wolverhampton student community have been through a challenging 18 months and their university experience has been severely disrupted while the world tackled the Covid-19 epidemic. Our current and incoming cohort deserve the very best that university life has to offer and, as life begins to return to campus, it is time for a fresh approach to student representation. That's why I am so proud to be the Students' Union President who has the honour of presenting our Strategic Plan 2021/22.

This is a brave and ambitious plan, tailor made for our unique student body, informed by feedback from the very members we exist to represent. We are proud of our diverse demographic of students at Wolverhampton. Each student will be on a unique student journey with individual purposes and hopes for their future. This plan is in place to ensure there are no barriers to prevent any student from getting the best from their student experience and achieving their dreams.

The need for a thriving students' union has never been greater. We are passionate about our students and dedicated to becoming the union our members need us to be. Now we have the plan to achieve it with a clear mission to ensure that we are always making life better, amplifying student voices, providing exciting opportunities and delivering services with impact.

We are Wolverhampton SU. We are proudly Wolverhampton, and we're here to help all students get the best out of university and life.

Tayabah Mahmood, President 2021/22, Wolves SU

A message from our Chief Executive, 2021-22

It is my great pleasure to introduce the exciting next phase of Wolves SU's proud history.

Before drawing together the plans for our future, we wanted to hear directly from our students. We wanted to truly understand our student communities by having clear, open conversations with students about their student experience, particularly reflecting on what it had been like be a student living through the Covid-19 pandemic – as well as their hopes for a brighter future. From these conversations, we had a clear understanding of what students at Wolverhampton want from their time at university. Our plan was formed to help the entire student community bounce back from the pandemic and thrive.

Our four core themes are all reflections of student feedback and focus on providing students with a compassionate, purposeful and impactful Students' Union:

- Belonging, Identity, and Community

- Wellbeing
- Opportunity
- Student Voice

We are very excited that this Strategic Plan is closely aligned with the University's Vision 2030 and thus providing the potential for new opportunities for further collaboration. This plan realigns Wolves SU's priorities to meet the needs of our students, and helps students to rediscover their community following an unsettled period living and studying remotely. We will be a Union that all students feel welcomed into a proud to be a part of. We will ensure that student mental health and wellbeing always stays at the top of the agenda. We will be a union that provides its members with incredible opportunities to learn, grow, indulge passions and make life- changing connections. Finally, as a campaigning organisation we will be resolute in our determination to ensure the student voice is always heard, understood and acted upon.

I would like to thank all of the students as well as our Sabbatical Officer Team, trustees, staff and University colleagues who have contributed towards this plan. Now, let's get started!

Nirmla Devi MBE, CEO, Wolverhampton SU

A message from our Vice- Chancellor, 2021-22

I am delighted to be contributing a foreword to the Students' Union's new Strategic Plan. The Students' Union plays an incredibly crucial role for our student body, as an integral part of ensuring a vibrant University community and sense of belonging through the warm welcome and ongoing support that they provide for both new and continuing students. The Students' Union provides opportunities for students to get involved with a wide range of clubs and societies, which help our students to get to know new people and develop skills through engaging in extra-curricular activities. They also represent the student body through ensuring that the student voice is heard through nominated representatives and the Sabbatical Officer team – all of whom work very hard at Wolverhampton and are greatly valued by staff and students alike.

At the University of Wolverhampton, we have a unique academic community and a diverse student population. The SU's Strategic Plan has been designed to provide the distinct and inclusive package of representation, support, events and campaigns that matter most to our students. It demonstrates the aspiration and ambition that, as the University of Opportunity, we ensure is at the forefront of everything we do in order to maximise the student experience and future prospects of our students. It aligns closely with the University's Strategic Plan, Vision 2030, which provides a framework for our vision to transform the leadership and workforce of our People and Place through inclusive student success and world-class research.

The Students' Union is there to enhance the opportunities and voice of our entire student community, and so I would like to urge each and every one of our students to make the most of their time at Wolverhampton by getting involved with the SU.

Geoff Layer, Vice-chancellor, University of Wolverhampton

Summary of our Strategic Plan

Our Vision, Mission and Values

Our vision

Proudly Wolverhampton. Inspiring and empowering all students get the best out of university and life.

Our mission

At the heart of the student community, making life better, amplifying student voices, providing exciting opportunities and delivering services with impact.

Our values

Supportive

Supporting our students to get the best out of their student experience

Inclusive

Welcoming, supporting, respecting and celebrating students of diverse backgrounds, experience or identity

Brave

A strong, proactive Union, trusted by students who know we have their back.

Innovative

Creative and agile. We will actively seek opportunities that will have a meaningful impact on students' lives

Our four Strategic Themes

Theme 1: Belonging, Identity, and Community

The Students' Union will be at the centre of a thriving, diverse community where all students and staff feel welcomed, comfortable, and able to be themselves.

Theme 2: Wellbeing

Our students feel happy and well.

Theme 3: Opportunity

Students can find the opportunities and gain the experience they need.

Theme 4: Student Voice

Students can find their voice and feel that they are heard.

Context and developing our Strategic Plan

Our City

The Student's Union is rooted in the City of Wolverhampton. Wolverhampton is a young city with a proud industrial and educational heritage. The University can trace its roots back to the early 19th century and just as it had a role to play at the heart of the industrial revolution it now leads the way in a region that invests and believes in young people and educational transformation. At the heart of the Union's new vision is our ambition to be '*proudly Wolverhampton*' recognising the role we can play at the University and wider region in helping people and communities to achieve their aspirations.

Our University

The University of Wolverhampton's strategic plan, Vision 2030, sets out ambitious and exciting plans for the next decade. The University's vision is:

'To transform the leadership and workforce of our Place through inclusive student success and world-class research'.

With a focus on two key pillars, inclusive student success and place, the University is looking to 'cement its place as the University of Opportunity'. The University has ambitious plans to grow student numbers from 27,000 to 40,000 over the next decade, with 25% of students coming from overseas.

The Union is a key partner in the delivery of the University's vision and their exciting plans present fantastic opportunities for the Union and our students. Our strategic plan seeks to position us firmly at the heart of the University community with a bold outward-looking agenda that enables our students to get the best out of their university life.

Our students

Our strategic plan is rooted in the needs of our diverse student body and recognises the unique challenges and opportunities our students may face. The University of Wolverhampton student population is diverse, with many students from backgrounds traditionally less likely to attend higher education. For example:

- 68% are first generation university attendees, compared to 48% sector norm
- 60%+ are from IMD quintiles 1&2 (lower-socio economic areas)
- Students are reflective of the demographics of the Black Country and the University has a strong track record of recruitment of BAME students¹.

Through a focus on community, wellbeing and opportunities, and by working to ensure our students' voices are heard, our strategic plan is about helping all our students to thrive.

Our Stakeholders

As part of our evidence gathering we spoke to many University and Union stakeholders:

¹ University Access and Participation Plan 2020-21 to 2024-25

- They think the Students' Union's direction should be bold, ambitious and rooted in student need. However, it must still be clear and focussed enough to be achievable
- Growing the partnership with the University to improve the student experience was seen as important and offers a key opportunity for the Students' Union to maximise its impact
- Improved presence across campus and increased communication with stakeholders and students was a key area to help the Students' Union achieve its goals
- While the Students' Union's strategy should tackle the serious issues students face, stakeholders felt that this needed to be balanced with being an organisation which ensures students have fun during their learning experience
- Building an inclusive community for students at the University of Wolverhampton was an important goal, and social spaces and events were seen to play a large role in this.

“Be daring and imaginative of the world you want to build, with principles of kindness and solidarity guiding you”

Academic research participant

“I want to be challenged by my students .. there are certain things that I did.... which was great, because it was in response to the students”

Academic research participant

The impact of Covid-19 on our students' lives

The pandemic has had far-reaching consequences for students at Wolverhampton. Not only have their academic lives been impacted, with a move to on-line learning and teaching, but their personal, family and work lives have also been affected.

In our research we asked students the extent to which Covid-19 has impacted their lives. Our students reported negative impacts across a wide range of issues including their social lives, mental health and wellbeing, and finances, as well as the teaching on their course and their own ability to do well at University. The stories we heard during the qualitative research, as well as from the students seeking support through our advice centre over the past 12 months have shown that some of our students are facing incredible hardship.

The consequences of the recent pandemic and national lockdowns will extend beyond the current academic year and continue to impact the lives of our students. As a result, proactively tackling the negative impacts of the pandemic has been fundamental to the development of our strategic plan. Our focus on community, wellbeing, opportunities and amplifying the student voice is central to our approach to supporting our students to bounce back from the impact of the pandemic and move forward to realise their aspirations.

"Many students are becoming despondent. The attitude is that students are rushing through the student experience...‘well we’re here now, let’s just get through it’....."

Student qualitative research participant

“Covid makes it more difficult, I’m a mother and the kids are home all day. For your academic work, you have to struggle...the work is intensified many times over”

Student qualitative research participant

A strategic plan based on students' lives and aspirations

We wanted a plan based on the needs of students and one that respects and understands the complexity of students' lives. To do this we undertook an extensive research and consultation exercise comprising:

- A robust student survey of 1,139 students to understand students' lives, needs, concerns and aspirations (conducted independently by Alterline a specialist student experience insight agency).
- 4 focus groups bringing together 30 students, and 16 one-to-one depth interviews with students, to understand students' lives in their own words (conducted by the Students' Union).

We also consulted extensively with stakeholders during the development of the strategic plan, including:

- A qualitative survey of stakeholders with 92 respondents to explore perceptions of the Union and opportunities for the future (conducted independently by Alterline)
- In-depth interviews with 16 university and union stakeholders (conducted independently by Adnovar).

As well as the primary research with stakeholders, 3 stakeholder workshops independently facilitated by Adnovar bringing together Union staff, trustees, sabbatical officers, student reps and representatives from the University. At these sessions participants reviewed the evidence and discussed and agreed upon our ambitions, the things that matter to us and how we are going to go about meeting those ambitions.

Our strategic plan

Our new strategic plan is focussed on the lives of our students and rooted in our history and place. Through extensive research and consultation, we have sought to ensure our plan is evidence-based and builds upon our partnership with the University and other local partners. Our strategic plan aligns with the goals and measures set out in the University's 'Vision 2030' strategy, supporting the University's ambition to:

- Embed our role as the University of Opportunity, offering access and supporting success to all those who can benefit
- Become recognised as a driving force for inclusivity
- A personalised approach to learning centred around the student
- Embed co-creation at the heart of all we do
- Ensure that all our students have the experience and employability skills to enable them to be global citizens.

We have set out an ambitious plan for the Students' Union to impact the lives of our students through a bold outward-looking agenda that centres on four key themes which will shape our work over the next three years.

Theme 1:	Belonging, Identity and Community
Theme 2:	Wellbeing
Theme 3:	Opportunities
Theme 4:	Student Voice

Our Vision, Mission and Values

Our vision is our ultimate aspiration for the future:

Our vision

Proudly Wolverhampton. Inspiring and empowering all students to get the best out of university and life.

Our mission is our commitment to what we will do for our students:

Our mission

At the heart of the student community, making life better, amplifying student voices, providing exciting opportunities and delivering services with impact.

Our values express who we are, our culture and how we will act:

Supportive

Supporting our students to get the best out of their student experience

Inclusive

Welcoming, supporting, respecting and celebrating students of diverse backgrounds, experience or identity

Brave

A strong, proactive Union, trusted by students who know we have their back

Innovative

Creative and agile. We will actively seek opportunities that will have a meaningful impact on students' lives

Theme 1: Belonging, Identity, and Community

What does the future look like?

The Students' Union will be at the centre of a thriving, diverse community where all students and staff feel welcomed, comfortable, and able to be themselves.

- Students understand the role of the SU and feel welcome
- Students see the SU and its societies as a place to develop new friendships, have fun and gain skills
- Students feel empowered to influence and shape their learning.

What do our students say now?

Our evidence has led us to a strategic focus on belonging, identify and community. Not enough of our students feel part of a community at University, many feel isolated and they are not getting the social experience they want from University life. Some students find it difficult to get involved with the Union and not all our students feel the Union or University are inclusive.

- Currently only half of students say they feel part of the University community and similar numbers say they felt welcomed into the student community when they arrived
- Around a third of students at Wolverhampton often feel isolated at University
- Whilst 59% of students agree that the Union is welcoming and inclusive to all types of students, less students (42%) agree that the Union makes it easy for students to get involved
- Just over half (55%) of students currently agree that the University is inclusive, falling to 38% who agree that the Union is inclusive.
- Only 24% of students agree that they are getting the social experience they want from University life.

" University experience for me is ...disappointing, not engaged, isolated from everyone...as a student, motivation is hard.

Student qualitative research participant

" The SU provides that community feel [... it] makes people become all-rounders".

Student qualitative research participant

What do our stakeholders say now?

Ensuring that students feel part of a community and make friends was perceived to be an important way in which the Students' Union could contribute to the overall student experience. Stakeholders also mentioned that the Students' Union should promote inclusivity within the student community.

What are we going to do?

Strategic Objective 1	We will establish a Union culture and practice that welcomes, supports, respects and represents students of diverse backgrounds, experience or identity.
Strategic Objective 2	Building diverse student communities that provide opportunities for friendship and connection.
Strategic Objective 3	Empowering students to be co-creators of a curriculum that relates to them.
Strategic Objective 4	Developing a high-quality societies offer that promotes a positive student experience.

How will we measure our success?

Success measures are embedded into our annual delivery plans, including:

- Numbers of students engaged across Students' Union services by key demographics
- Experience of students engaged in our services.

In the future our students will say:

"The Students' Union is welcoming and inclusive to all types of students"

"The Students' Union has a positive impact on my social life"

Theme 2: Wellbeing

What does the future look like?

Our students feel happy and well.

- Students talk about their mental health without stigma with the Union providing safe spaces for those conversations
- Students are empowered to look after their own wellbeing
- Students know where to go to get the help they need and feel supported.

What do our students say now?

Doing well at university is intimately related to being well. Student wellbeing is rooted in happiness, satisfaction and being part of a community.

- One-in-three students report low life satisfaction and just under two-thirds say that Covid has had a negative impact on their wellbeing
- 30% of students say the Union has a positive impact on their wellbeing
- 57% say they know where to go at University if they need help and advice
- 67% of students said that they feel the university could provide help if they needed it.

""If the SU can do anything, maybe it should focus on mental health education..."

Student qualitative research participant

Student wellbeing is impacted by many issues and academic concerns feature prominently for students:

- 'exams and assignments', 'academic achievement' and 'academic workload' are a concern for over 70% of students
- Mental health and wellbeing is a concern for almost two-thirds of students (64%) alongside 'loneliness' for 45% of students
- Financial issues are a concern for around half of students with 54% concerned about being able to pay for the things they need and 47% about their levels of debt.

" "University experience for me is devastating – disappointing, not engaged, isolated from everyone, shoddy mental health. Upset because of no contact with anyone. As a student, motivation is hard"

Student qualitative research participant

In our research we also asked students the extent to which Covid-19 has impacted their lives. Our students reported negative impacts across a wide range of issues including their social lives, mental health and wellbeing, and finances. The stories we heard during the qualitative research, as well as from the students seeking support through our advice centre over the past 12 months have shown that some of our students are facing incredible hardship.

What do our stakeholders say now?

Advising students was seen as a common way in which the Students' Union should support its members. Stakeholders said that the Students' Union should be able to offer advice on all aspects of students' lives, both within and outside University, or be able to signpost to external organisations if they could not.

What are we going to do?

1.Strategic Objective 5	1.Improve Mental Health Awareness.
1.Strategic Objective 6	Provide opportunities to nurture wellbeing.
1.Strategic Objective 7	Support students to access relevant services when they need them.

How will we measure our success?

Success measures are embedded into our annual delivery plans, including:

- Number of well-being (or well-being related) cases identified in the Advice Centre
- Students' self-identified wellbeing levels
- Number of wellbeing events/activities organised by the Union
- Student experience of wellbeing events/activities.

In the future our students will say:

"The Students' Union has a positive impact on my wellbeing"

"I would turn to the Students' Union if I needed help or advice"

Theme 3: Opportunity

What does the future look like?

Students can find the opportunities and gain the experience they need.

- Students identify the Union as a provider of opportunities to gain work experience and skills
- Students who are involved in Union activities can clearly communicate the skills they have gained
- Students feel able to use their Union experience as a platform for future leadership roles
- Students recognise the Union as being supportive of entrepreneurial activities
- Students know where to go for careers advice.

What do our students say now?

Employability is crucial to students and the Union can play a vital role in helping to prepare students for the future. Students would like to see the Union help them develop their experience, confidence, networking and leadership skills:

- Around two-thirds (67%) of students say that their current activities at University are preparing them for their future career
- Less than half of students (47%) agree they know where to go for help with careers and employability advice at University
- Around 1 in 4 students require further support to think about their future careers
- Currently 20% of students would say the Union is making them more employable.

"My course is quite broad. Many of the career workshops haven't been relevant for me..... Employability support for me needs to help me get a leadership role, and the support I have received hasn't been anything I couldn't get from Google"

Student qualitative research participant

There is a large appetite amongst the Wolverhampton student population for volunteering:

- More than 1 in 3 students said they are very interested in volunteering around mental health, education, health and social care and reducing inequalities.

".... Specifically, I am unsure of the process of applying for work in the UK, and needed help with preparing CVs, cover letters, and with the interview process. I feel as if the Uni Workplace doesn't understand the difficulties international students face. I am applying for jobs in my home country and having success"

Student qualitative research

What do out stakeholders say now?

A core part of delivering the best possible student experience was seen as helping students to grow and develop. This included students' personal growth and ensuring that they leave University with the requisite skills to enter the workplace. In case of the former, supporting students to explore their interests and broaden their horizons outside of their academic work was key.

What are we going to do?

1.Strategic Objective 8	1.Provide students with the opportunities to gain work experience and confidently translate skills to prospective employers.
1.Strategic Objective 9	1.Provide opportunities to develop leadership potential.
1.Strategic Objective 10	1.Promote an entrepreneurial culture that raises awareness self-employment opportunities.
1.Strategic Objective 11	1.Encourage and support students to access quality careers advice.

How will we measure our success?

Success measures are embedded into our annual delivery plans, including:

- Number of students in paid/voluntary student roles in the SU
- Number of students engaged in personal development projects
- Student experiences of engaging in opportunities
- Number of students referred to careers service.

In the future our students will say:

"The Students' Union is
making me more
employable"

Theme 4: Student Voice

What does the future look like?

Students can find their voice and feel that they are heard.

- Students feel that we listen, understand their experience and advocate on their behalf
- Students feel that they can positively influence their educational experience
- Students see the Union as an agent for positive change
- Students feel that we are proud to celebrate their successes with them.

What do our students say now?

Representing students both individually and at group level (e.g. course, faculty, department) is crucial, as is being up-to-date with the latest student concerns and issues. We recognise that particular groups of students may face both systematic and more isolated academic issues for example, the attainment gap and the international student experience. Our School Reps are our ambassadors and must reflect our values and demonstrate our impact.

Whilst this year has been an extraordinary one and the University has responded to challenging circumstances:

- one in three students would not say they are satisfied with the quality of their course
- only around half of students would currently say the Union effectively represents their academic interests, and just a quarter say they can influence decisions made by the Union.

The SU should be a natural part of Uni life....when things go wrong at Uni, they can go really wrong, it's useful to have that support so you don't feel like you're losing your head"

Student qualitative research participant

"....People need to know there is support, and if people know they can go to the SU, it would really help them"

Student qualitative research participant

Current levels of engagement are low:

- Only 13% of students stating they are a member of the Union
- Only one in three (34%) of students are satisfied with the students' union but
- The majority of students (55%) say they are neither satisfied nor dissatisfied indicating a real opportunity to engage this group and turn them into satisfied members.

"the only way you can make an impact is by getting involved"

Student qualitative research participant

Few students feel they can influence decisions made by the Union (25%) and only 23% say that they know how to do this:

- 43% of students feel that the Union represents the views of students effectively and 46% say decisions are driven by student voice.

Students come to the University to study, do well and gain employment using their newly-earned qualifications. Student representation around their academic experience is fundamental to the role of a students' union. Currently

- around half of students say that the Union effectively represents students' academic interests (54%) and academic issues (53%).
- Two-thirds (66%) of students are satisfied with their course overall, with 17% explicitly not satisfied.

Given the level of impact on University life the pandemic has had, relatively large proportions of students remain satisfied with

- their course content (71%) the intellectual challenge (67%), teaching (66%) feedback (63%) and assessment (62%).

The four areas with the highest levels of dissatisfaction are

- contact time (28%), placements (27%) and organisation (23%), timetabling 22%) and opportunities to apply learning (22%).

What do our stakeholders say now?

The most common perception of how the Students' Union should support students to get the best experience at University was by representing them and providing them with a voice. Often, this was articulated as a bridge between students and the University, with the Students' Union ensuring that the University can make key decisions in line with student opinion and needs.

What are we going to do?

1.Strategic Objective 12	1.Ensure student voice at the grass roots level is heard, understood and acted upon.
1.Strategic Objective 13	1.Continuously developing a high-quality student rep system that delivers impact.
1.Strategic Objective 14	1.Improve democratic process to make It easier for students to vote, take part in elections and deliver change.
1.Strategic Objective 15	1.Embedding a culture of learning, evaluation and celebrating success.

How will we measure our success?

Success measures are embedded into our annual delivery plans, including:

- Number of academic issues raised/resolved
- Number of candidates for election and demographic breakdown
- Number of voters and demographic breakdown
- Number of policy changes recommended/implemented.

In the future, our students will say:

"The Students' Union effectively represents students academic interests"

"I know how to influence decisions made by the Students' Union"

"I am a member of the Students' Union"

Strategic Enablers

What does the future look like?

To deliver our vision we need to have the right:

- Resources
- Communications
- Robust evidence

Resources

Financial resources are needed to deliver our plan and serve the needs of students. We will manage our funds to ensure that Union is financially sustainable. Where appropriate, we will seek additional funding to support our objectives.

We will have staff with the capacity, confidence, expertise and experience to deliver results, who are satisfied in their roles and feel motivated, valued and rewarded.

We will regularly reflect on what we do, how we do it and the impact it has, striving to improve.

Our values will be reflected in our team with a positive, learning and supportive culture which promotes collaboration.

Marketing and communications

We will develop and deliver a new brand and marketing strategy to support our vision and make sure our values shine through strongly in what we say and the way we say it.

We will say it with the right tone of voice and have content that is inspiring and relevant.

Evidence and impact

The strategic plan will be underpinned by annual delivery plans which set out clearly what we want to achieve each year and how we will measure success. We will have a continuous programme of quantitative and qualitative student engagement to measure progress and further develop insight into students' lives and experiences. We will continue to listen and reflect, proactively working with our students to make sure they thrive during their time at the University of Wolverhampton.