

JS GROUP

“Shining the light on student financial support”

An insight report on the distribution of cash bursaries & scholarships during the 2022/23 Academic year



September 2023

Foreword

Peter Gray, CEO JS Group

In higher education today, **hundreds of millions of pounds in financial support** is given to students to help them manage their time at university. Without it, students would struggle, impacting on retention, progression, mental health & wellbeing and ultimately degree outcomes.

At JS Group we have been supporting more than a million students across our 34 partner universities with our Aspire Technology Platform, managing the distribution of bursaries and scholarships. This has given us a unique insight into student behaviour across the country which has helped our partners develop their financial support provision.

In 2022, in partnership with Payit, NatWest's Open Banking Technology Platform, we developed **Aspire Cash**: our new technology that, in the words of one of our partners, has **"transformed"** the way in which universities can put cash in the hands of students.

In this report we are delighted to share what we have learned from thousands of students about what they use financial support for.

Professor Mike Thorne

CBE

Former Vice Chancellor
of UEL & ARU

"Universities are in a fast-changing world and need great partners and new ideas to help them adapt. Understanding what students use financial support for is important in ensuring that we reach those most in need"

Executive Summary

"The data is a game changer" | University of Sunderland

Concerns around the cost of living and the need for a better understanding of how financial support is used has driven the adoption of Aspire Cash amongst universities at pace. It is because of this that we now have a large enough data set to be able to see patterns of student activity and point to areas of interest for the sector. Building this analysis over time and looking at the data with regard both to award type and how students use their awards, will provide very rich data to help improve both the deployment of financial support and the outcomes derived from it.

Aspire Cash was designed in partnership with 2 universities specifically to deliver the following outcomes:

1 - Improved efficiency

Aspire Cash has significantly improved the operational processes behind the delivery of financial support, both in terms of not needing to collate students' bank details, and in making it easier to allocate funds whether individually or to larger groups. According to our partner universities, the main beneficiaries have been Finance and Student Services and it has "transformed" the process.

"We are really saving the time of our back-office student finance functions, which frees them up to provide added value to students. We're all big fans of it."

Professor Andrew Ireland
Pro Vice-Chancellor for
Students and Teaching
UCLan

Executive Summary

2 – Data on students’ use of funds

As students access their funds and draw cash into their accounts they tell us, from a NASMA approved list, the primary categories they need their cash for. In addition, a free text field allows students to tell us other reasons for their use of cash. With 118,000 withdrawals this has provided a rich set of data that helps build our understanding of cash need. Detail is shown in the body of this report.

Ben Dale

CFO

University of
Sunderland

*“[JS Group Aspire] reduces admin costs, gives **excellent data** and makes the task so much easier... it’s all about efficiency of process, **quality of information**, and just taking pressure off the university and its resources.”*

3 – Repurposing unused funds

A core principle of Aspire Cash is that students’ funds are credited to them, and they use open banking technology to collect the funds when they want rather than it being pushed into their bank account as a lump sum. This means that if a student drops out without having drawn down all their funds their account can be stopped, and those undrawn funds retained and repurposed to those in need.

At year end, we have
seen unused funds of

9%*

**JS Group analysis*

Executive Summary

4 - Empowering students

Central to the success of Aspire Cash has been the significant change this has made to the student experience. This can be put into 3 simple categories:

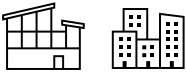
- First, students can access their **funds in minutes** rather than the process often taking days. This has been **transformational** in the delivery of hardship or Cost of Living type payments.
- Second, students can draw funds into an account of their choice (or use the funds to buy the products or services they need from the Aspire student engagement portal). This is particularly important, for example, when students have others with **control** over certain bank accounts or their current account is in overdraft.
- Third, students are using the process as a **budgeting tool**, drawing down what they need when they need it rather than simply having the entire amount credited to their bank account on day one. Students tell us that the ability to draw down funds when they need them has better helped them manage their day-to-day finances.

*"The feedback we have had has been incredibly positive. It's not just the **speed** but also some unforeseen benefits such as **protecting their funds** via the use of the Aspire platform for **students that may otherwise be at risk** of financial abuse from others through open access to their bank accounts."*

Simon Lee

Assistant Director for the
Student Journey
University of Sunderland

Executive Summary: in numbers



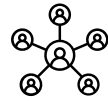
11

Ten Universities and one philanthropic donor participated



£19.1 m

£19.1 million of cash distributed between Sept 22 and July 23



53,049

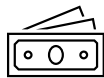
53,049 students given cash



134

134 unique fund types used

Average 12 per institution



£360

Average cash value awarded per student was £360



91%

91% of the money was used in-year



118,429

118,429 individual withdrawals

Average 2 per student

JS GROUP

Report of Key Findings

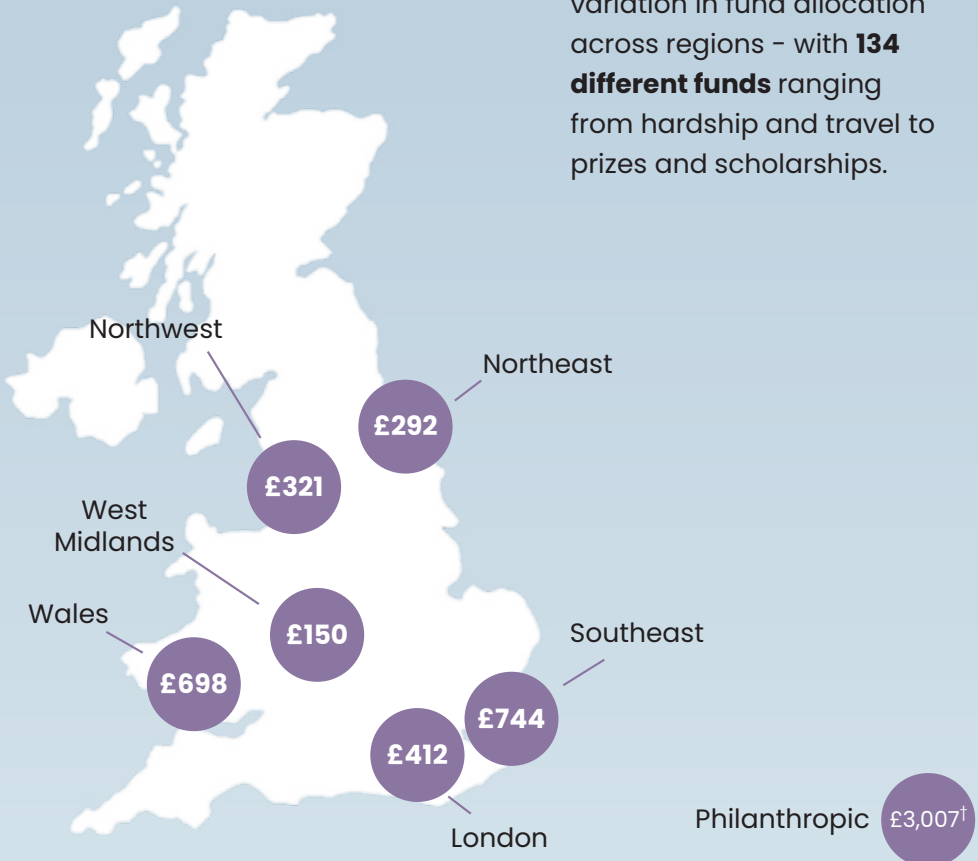


Average cash award per student

National average*

£360

While the average award is £360, there is considerable variation in fund allocation across regions - with **134 different funds** ranging from hardship and travel to prizes and scholarships.



vecteezy.com

*Weighted average

† Received by a small number of students, did not affect average weighting

Engagement



53,049
students



£19.1 m
credited

Engagement is measured using two criteria: firstly, the percentage of the 53,049 students awarded cash who used the service to draw funds and secondly, of the funds available, what percentage was drawn down.



On average, each student drew on funds 2.2 times. Each time cash is drawn the student gives a reason for withdrawal and these reasons are documented later in the report.

Undrawn funds fall into two categories:

1. where students are drawing slowly over a period of time, and
2. where students have subsequently withdrawn from their studies without taking all their funds.

*"It's our duty, and right at the heart of our University's mission, to **remove barriers** – and our Achieve approach [through JS Group] helps us to remove barriers to support their success."*

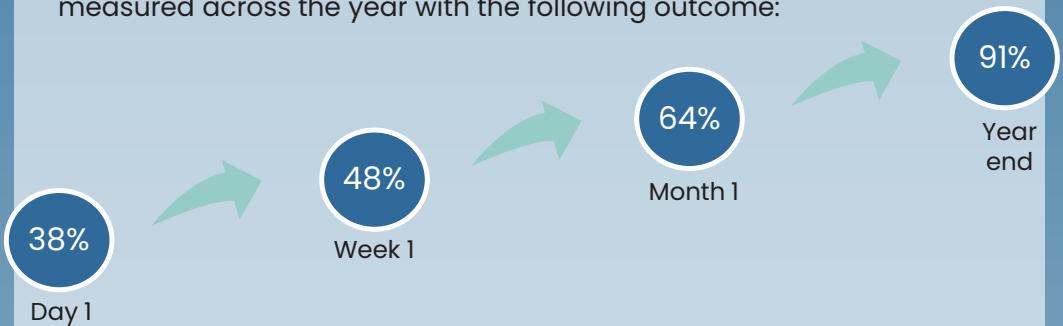
Professor Andrew Ireland

Pro Vice-Chancellor for Students and Teaching
UCLan

Cash draw over time

Cash is allocated to student accounts in line with university policy on each particular type of financial award (Care Leaver, Asylum Seeker, etc). Over time, analysis by type of award will provide valuable insight.

The average **rate of drawdown** (either into an individual bank account or through the Aspire Portal to procure goods and services) was measured across the year with the following outcome:



These rates of drawdown point to students using their Aspire Cash system as a budgeting tool with urgent hardship payments having the quickest rate and monthly Cost of Living payments having the slowest.

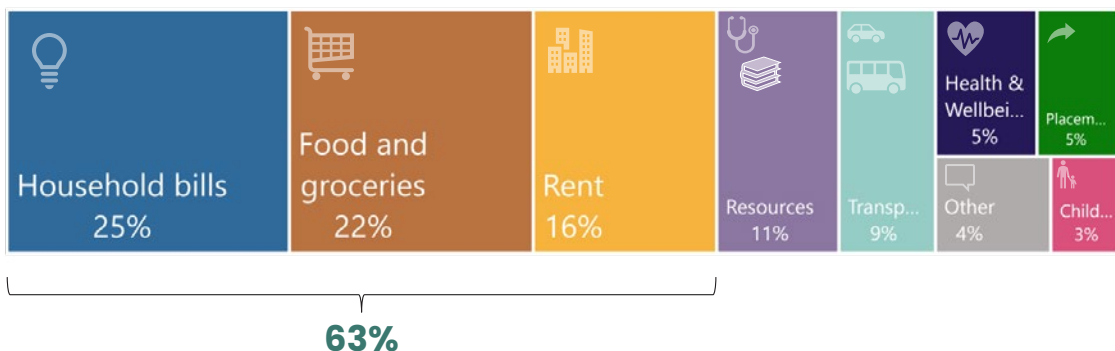
We also saw a number of students holding off and drawing the funds well after they had been allocated, indicating that the time wasn't right for them to use the funds immediately.

*"The JS Group method and service has **revolutionised** our payments process – both in the **speed** of the transactions and the **take-up of funds by students.**"*

Nick Brierley
Head of Financial Processes
UCLAN

What is financial support used for?

Students select the intended use of funds from a menu each time they draw cash; 96% of funds withdrawn fall under the 8 main categories.



63% of total withdrawals are for core “**cost of living**” uses (household bills, food and groceries and rent).

A further 33% is spent on other critical areas of support including resources, transport, placements, health & wellbeing, and childcare.

The “Other” category allows students to enter a reason for drawing down funds in their own words, giving insight into the wide range of needs they face. This is explored later in the report.

*“It has really enhanced the **value** to us and the student; and the **trust** is built with JS Group”*

Kirsten Black
Chief Operating Officer
University of Sunderland













Supporting cost of living

Comparing spend categories: total amount spent and number of students spending it

The highest number of transactions were drawn for **food & groceries**: over 18800 students made 35000+ withdrawals at an average of just over £100 each time.

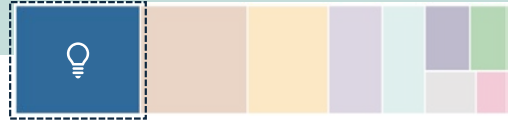
Slightly fewer students withdrew funds to pay **household bills**, but the average amount was higher, topping £160.

Higher still, the average amount taken out for **rent** was over **£230**. Just under 8000 students used this an average of 1.5 times in the year.

	Ranking by total amount withdrawn £	Ranking by number of withdrawals & students*
1	 Household bills	 Food & groceries
2	 Food & groceries	 Household bills
3	 Rent	 Resources
4	 Resources	 Rent
5	 Transport	 Transport
6	 Health & wellbeing	 Health & wellbeing

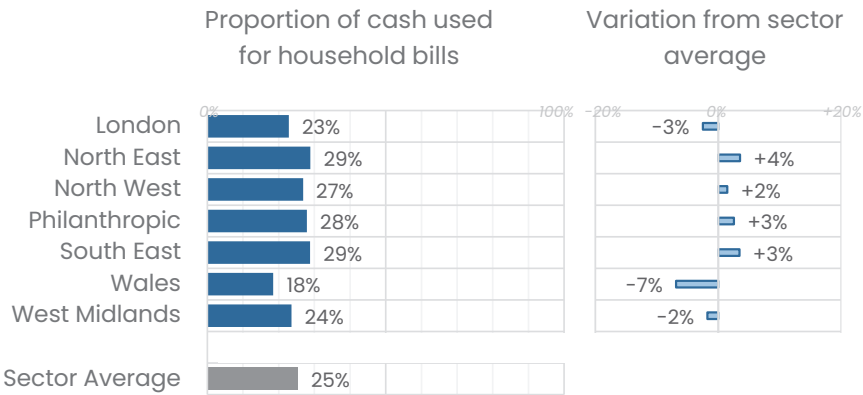
* Excludes "Other". Ranking by count of students and by number of withdrawals has the same outcome

Regional difference in spend categories



Household bills

Over £4m, the single largest use of cash, was spent on **household bills**. This will include general bills, utilities and other household needs.



Overall, **25%** of funds was used to support household bills. Regionally, students in Wales spent the least whilst students in the North East and South East spent the most as a proportion of their funds.

*"It really helped us in terms of our **clarity** of reporting and has added a lot of **efficiency** to how we operate"*

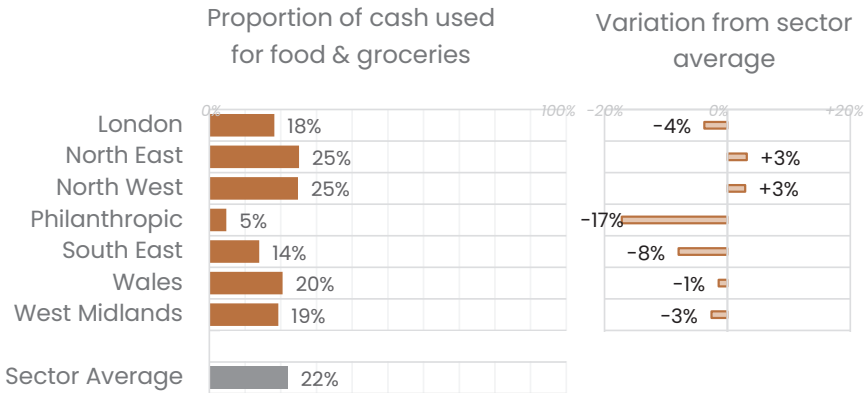
Andy Cook
Vice Chancellor
Ravensbourne University

Regional difference in spend categories



Food & groceries

£3.7m was spent on **food and groceries**. Given the cost-of-living crisis and the sudden increase in the cost of basic food, many institutions instigated additional cost of living payments to support this.



Overall **22%** of funds was used for food and groceries. Regionally, the North West and North East spent a greater proportion, with London and the South East spending the least as a proportion.

“Emergency cash payments now happen in 30 minutes when they used to take a week”

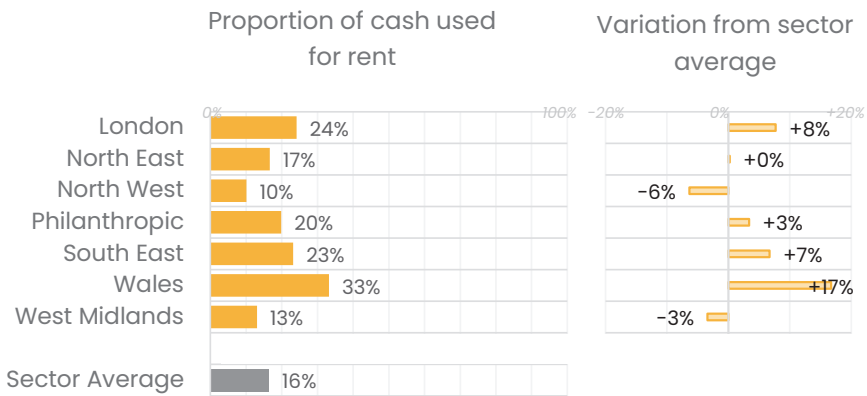
Nick Braisby
Vice Chancellor, BNU

Regional difference in spend categories



Rent

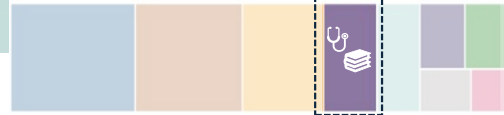
A total of £2.8m (16%) was spent on **rent**, the third biggest category. There were large regional variances, with London and Wales spending the greatest proportion and the North West and Midlands spending the least.



"Aspire Cash has reduced the administration process for bursaries by 80%"

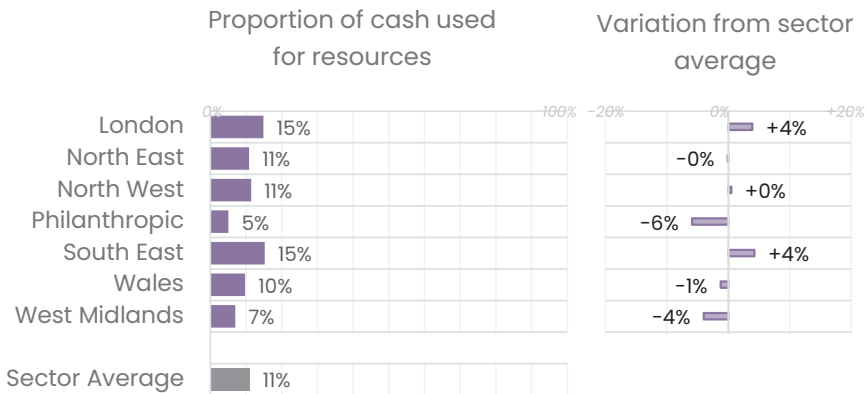
Lena Smith
Funding Officer
Cardiff University

Regional difference in spend categories



Resources

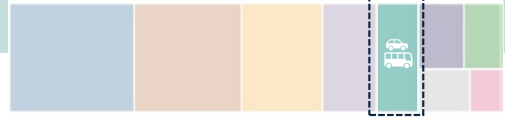
£1.9m (11%) of funds drawn was spent on **resources**. This includes digital equipment such as laptops, and other items needed to support study. Regionally, London and the South East spent a greater proportion on this category; at one university the proportion spent on resources was 25%.



*"It's helping us to be much more efficient as an organisation at a time when it's critical for universities to be hyper-efficient... **It is huge.**"*

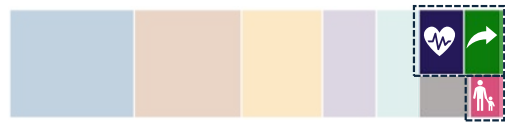
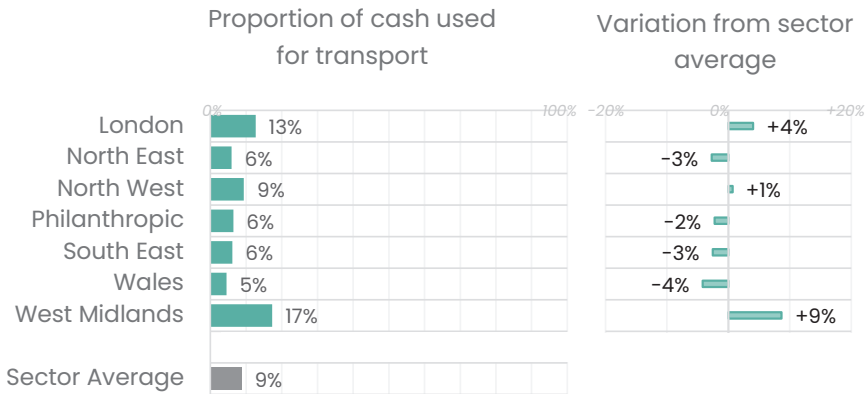
Professor Andrew Ireland
Pro Vice-Chancellor for Students and Teaching
UCLan

Regional difference in spend categories



Transport

A total of £1.5m (9% of funds drawn) was used for **transport**.



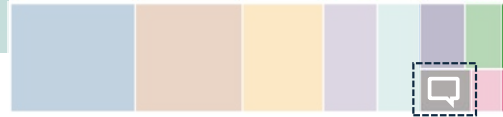
Further spend categories

 £951k (5% of funds drawn) was spent on **health & wellbeing**.

 £788k (4.5% of funds drawn) was spent on **placements**.

 £435k (2.5% of funds drawn) was spent on **childcare**.

Other spend needs



Other



'Other' is a free text category, allowing students to describe how they intend to use the funds in their own words. Reviewing these reasons gives a deep insight into the specific needs of students.

Examples given by students are:

- Personal development
- Dyslexia assessment
- Mobile phone
- Cost of living crisis
- Prescription glasses
- Food and clothing
- Children's activities
- Repaying debt/overdraft
- Dentist
- DSA laptop
- Next year's accommodation deposit
- To start a business
- Care home fees

Conclusions

This report shines a light on the uses to which tens of thousands students have put their financial support. As we gain more partner universities using Aspire Cash we will be able to offer deeper insights into the needs of students, whichever type of financial support they receive.

Nonetheless, there are already clear outputs to show what students use their cash for, and this will help universities to:

- better understand student needs over time
- use that understanding to improve targeting
- reduce waste

Of equal importance is gaining a deeper understanding of the individual free text fields, to spot rising trends and therefore position intervention appropriately.

While it wasn't an anticipated outcome, data on how quickly students have drawn down their funds is suggesting that some students use the scheme as a budgeting tool and that some use it to protect the funds from shared bank accounts.

The efficiency, speed, and clarity of the process has been applauded by partner universities across the UK, with resources now freed up to focus on student experience and participation rates.

*"[JS Group] have provided an **outstanding service**. They've simply made a **huge difference**. I am really keen to see where they can take us next."*

Nick Brierley
Head of Financial
Processes
UCLan

Contact us

At JS Group we have a real passion and commitment to understand our partners needs and to build robust technology to help them achieve their goals.

We have a team of over 60 staff with a wide range of expertise and experience who are committed to being trusted and knowledgeable partners working with institutions every day to deliver the very best service to their students.

For any enquiries, or to book a demonstration of our technology that will support and benefit your student bursaries, scholarships and other financial schemes, please contact Julie Walkling or David Marshall:



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