

Policy Briefing – UCL should provide cheap meals

Welfare & Community Zone, May 2024

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

At the Wilkin's Refectory Restaurant (run by UCL's caterer, CH&CO), students are offered a range of hot and cold meals, with hot main meals starting at £5.95 according to the Food at UCL app.

The Students' Union's café outlets (George Farha Café, Gordon's Café, Print Room Café, and Bloomsbury Café) provide a range of affordable hot and cold meals.¹ Current menus include porridge for £2.50, grab and go options from 70p and soup for £3.25. The Students' Union is working on a new menu for the Print Room Café that will include pasta options.

The Students' Union has kept many prices the same over the last few years and ensures that it offers food across a range of price points (including low budget items where they will make a loss or break even). The Union try wherever possible to not increase any prices, but in some instances have had to due to increased costs.

The Students' Union has been subject to large increases in the costs of purchasing goods and supplies as food prices have increased. There are a variety of reasons behind these increases, these include supply shortages, import controls, escalating fuel costs and global supply chain disruptions. As well as the rising cost of food, wages for staff at the Students' Union have also increased. The Union is proud to pay student staff London Living Wage, which saw an increase of 10% earlier this year.²

What is the relevant national/ international context to this situation?

The UK is currently facing a cost-of-living crisis with costs, particularly food and energy prices, rising dramatically in 2022.³ Recent research conducted by Russell Group Student' Union has demonstrated that 1 in 4 students regularly go without food or other necessities.⁴ The Annual Student Money survey conducted by "Save the Student" further found that 18% of students had used a food bank in 2022/2023, a 10% increase from the previous academic year.⁵

The survey conducted for the Russell Group Student' Union Cost of Living Report revealed that 1 in 5 UCL students has regularly forgone necessities and that 49% of student did not feel confident that they had sufficient funds to over their basic cost of living, including basic nutrition.

¹ <https://studentsunionucl.org/eat-drink-shop#>

² <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/news/real-living-wage-increases-%C2%A312-uk-and-%C2%A31315-london>

³ <https://www.ons.gov.uk/economy/inflationandpriceindices/articles/costofliving/latestinsights>

⁴ <https://studentsunionucl.org/articles/cost-of-living-what-we-found/>

⁵ <https://www.savethestudent.org/money/surveys/student-money-survey-2023-results.html>

Are there any legal implications to this item for discussion?

No.

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

No.

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder/ public relations issues with this item for discussion?

The Students' Union commercial services (all of the cafés, bars, shops and the gym that the Union runs) are a social enterprise. This means that any surplus that is made goes straight back into the Students' Union, helping to fund club and societies, sports and arts initiatives, the advice service and volunteering. Any changes to the price of food would need to be carefully considered and the potential impact to the funding of wider Students' Union activities assessed.

Are there any sustainability implications to this item for discussion?

No.

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this item for discussion?

Yes, the provision of more affordable meals on campus would directly benefit all students affected by the cost-of-living crisis and especially those in the greatest need. It would further create a more welcoming and inclusive environment on campus, contributing to student physical and mental well-being.

What would be the next steps?

If this policy proposal is ratified at Union Executive, the relevant Sabbatical Officer would meet with the Director of Operations and the Head of Commercial Services to discuss the next steps in offering cheaper food to students at Students' Union commercial outlets.

To address the cost of food at the Wilkins Refectory, the relevant Sabbatical Officer would need to meet with UCL to discuss a cheaper food offer for students.