SPA STUDENT PUBLICATION ASSOCIATION

Membership Survey 2026



October 2026

Key Findings

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Note on how the findings are displayed

- Not all questions in the survey were mandatory. In general, where a question's total responses equals 85, the question was mandatory.
- Where presented outside of a table, percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number, with 0.5 and above rounded up.
- Each respondent publication was assigned a code from R001 to R085.
- Quotations from survey responses are reproduced as written, with any editorial insertions shown in square brackets, and attributed to the respondent's code.

Author

This report was created by Jack Walsh, the Membership Officer for 2026/27, based on the findings of the membership survey in October 2026.
Any queries can be directed to: membership@spajournalism.com

Survey link: https://forms.gle/9Bxe6ZNvSzrmgHff9

Survey overview

- This survey was conducted by the Student Publication Association (SPA), a registered charity in England and Wales which represents over 270 student publications across the UK and Republic of Ireland (ROI).
- It officially ran for three months from 20 June to 20 September 2026, but will remain open for responses. The findings in this report do not include publications that responded after 20 September.

Outreach

All SPA member publications were emailed three times over the submission period. Those with Instagram accounts were sent direct messages twice and numerous individual members of publications, usually Editors-in-Chief (EICs), were contacted on Instagram. In addition, the SPA team (excluding Trustees) conducted their own outreach with a set number of publications assigned to each of them. They were tasked with identifying at least one named individual, where possible, to contact directly.

Response rate

Total responses received = 88 (all from member publications)

Total respondent publications = 85 (3 publications filled it out twice)

- **The 85 publications represented 31% of member publications.**
- The average response rate across all eight SPA regions and national member publications was 32%.
- Wales had the highest response rate (50%), followed by Scotland (40%).
- The highest number of responses (18) came from Ireland and Northern Ireland.

About the respondent publications

- The 85 respondent publications were drawn from across the SPA's membership of over 270 publications, in every region.

36% (n=31) of respondent publications were main campus newspapers

Publication type		
Independent	10	11.76%
Magazine	14	16.47%
Main campus magazine	10	11.76%
Main campus newspaper	31	36.47%
Newspaper	5	5.88%
Societal publication	10	11.76%
Student blog	1	1.18%
Website	4	4.71%
Total	85	

- Specialist publications, which focus on a particular subject or interest (such as arts, science or politics) rather than general campus news, made up 45% (n=38) of respondents, broadly in line with their share of the overall membership (52%). Specialist titles can fall under any of the publication types above.

Role of respondent at publication		
Current EIC/President	53	62.35%
25/26 EIC/President	22	25.88%
24/25 EIC	1	1.18%
Other editorial team member	9	10.59%
Total	85	

62% (n=53) of responses came from a current EIC/President in post for 26/27

Publishers & editorial independence

A publisher is the body legally responsible for a publication, such as a Students' Union, university, university society, or society guild.

Who is your publication's publisher?		
Students' Union	41	48.24%
Independent	24	28.24%
University Society	10	11.76%
Society Guild	4	4.71%
University	2	2.35%
University Course	2	2.35%
University Department/faculty	2	2.35%
Total no. of publications	85	

48% (n=41) are published by a Students' Union

72% (n=61) are published by a body existing within a university environment

Only 12% (n=10) had an SU officer as an EIC/part of the team

Is your Editor-in-Chief or any other publication staff member part of a Students' Union Executive?		
Yes	10	11.76%
No	75	88.24%
Total no. of publications	85	

Does your publication have independent editorial oversight from your publisher?		
Yes	37	43.53%
N/A	25	29.41%
In certain circumstances	16	18.82%
No	7	8.24%
Total no. of publications	85	

8% (n=7) do not have independent editorial oversight

Of the 23 free-text answers received on editorial independence, representing 27% of total responding publications, the following can be said:

- Five out of the 23 respondents had a publisher that was not an SU (either a society or university course).
    - Four out of the 5 had editorial independence most of the time, with the publisher (a society in all cases) only getting involved if content went against the publication and/or society's aims and guidelines.
    - The fifth was overseen by a university course. In this instance, a lecturer gave assistance when content touched on serious subjects or when issues arose.

Students' Unions as publishers:

- Eighteen out of the 23 respondents had some form of SU involvement in their editorial process, primarily as the publisher.
- Of these 18 respondents, 5 did not have independent editorial oversight from their SU and a further publication's freedom to publish 'is under threat amid policy changes and an [sic] intimidation from Students' Union leaders.' (R014)
    1. In one case, the 'SU has the right to take down or edit any content as they see fit.' (R012)
    2. Another is 'not allowed to report anything negative about the university.' (R066)
    3. A third has to 'have signoff for all' (R045) content from their SU.
    4. A fourth said all 'print editions require at least 1 week of review time with the SU' (R071), with printing dependent on approval.

- Twelve out of the 18 have independent editorial oversight from their SU in certain circumstances. The degree of independence varies greatly as seen from a sample of the responses below:
    1. One publisher (SU) regulates output within mutually agreed bye-laws and can 'open a discussion about whether those have been breached upon complaint' (R010) but doesn't have editorial oversight besides this.
    2. One publication said that while they are free to publish what they want, including criticisms of their SU, the SU does approve every single article for each edition to 'make sure everything said is within media law and accurate, mostly.' (R019)
    3. Another publication received 'occasional advice from the Students' Union on how to approach our coverage of sensitive topics relevant to them.' (R025)
    4. A fourth said they 'are fully independent except for when covering students union elections.' (R042)
    5. A fifth only had independence when publishing online, but in print their SU 'oversee absolutely everything and make publishing anything about them or the university borderline impossible' (R070). The publication also said, 'If an article talks about the university, [SU], sexual assault or any other harmful themes, it must be ran [sic] through [the SU] who get final discretion if something is published. Often it won't be, they will keep us in a continuous loop of questions and claim it breaks media law.'
- Four of the 18 SUs required sign-off before a publication could publish or print anything.

The relationship with publishers

60% (n=51) had a good or very good relationship with their publisher

What is the relationship with your publisher like?		
Very Good	25	29.41%
Good	26	30.59%
Okay	11	12.94%
Very Poor	3	3.53%
Q not applicable (independent)	20	23.53%
Total no. of publications	85	

*multiple choice selection (none selected 'poor')

However, of the 36 (42%) respondents who expanded in free text answers, several described the relationship differently from their multiple-choice answer.

In free-text responses, relationship portrayed as:		
Negative	12	33.33%
Positive	11	30.56%
Mixed	8	22.22%
Other	5	13.89%
Total no. of publications	36	

*Free-text answers were coded by the author.

56% (n=20) of free-text respondents had a mixed or negative relationship with their publisher

In general, based on the 36 free-text responses:

- Positive relationships are defined largely by editorial freedom and a hands-off publisher.
- Negative relationships tended to involve control or pressure (hostility to critical journalism, new oversight mechanisms, forced edits, marketing demands) or involve neglect or obstruction (publishers that won't promote the title, lack resources, or make registration slow).
- The dividing line is largely editorial independence and resourcing. Where publishers leave content alone and provide support, relationships tend to be good. Where they exercise control, or lack the money or interest to help, they tend to be negative or mixed.

- **31% (n=11) of the 36 publications described a positive working relationship with their publisher.**
    1. One publication said they had regular meetings and 'a very good relationship with our SU' (R002).
    2. 'They back us when we pursue difficult stories and have never tried to block us.' (R016)
    3. Another publication described the relationship as 'good overall and they give us a lot of freedom' (R036).
    4. 'High levels of independence and devolved decision making' (R069) were provided by one publisher.

- **22% (n=8) of the 36 portrayed a mixed relationship with their publisher.**
    1. One publication described uncertainty around funding and having to fight for resources, but mentioned that 'some members of the union have also worked hard to advocate for us' (R001).
    2. Another publication described a dynamic where the relationship was good so long as they didn't criticise their SU or the university.
    3. While one publication is 'given almost full autonomy' (R031) by their publisher, they would like more support with projects.

Continued on next page.

4. One publication said its relationship with the SU occasionally broke down whenever it had queries, because 'questions are usually tossed between departments without ever being answered directly' (R032).
5. The head of a society last year did not communicate with or facilitate one publication 'as well as they could have' (R060), but a change in personnel leads the respondent to conclude the relationship may be strengthened this year.

- **33% (n=12) of the 36 publications had a negative working relationship with their publisher.**

    1. One publication, which occupies an office in its SU building but receives no SU funding, described a recently passed motion that made 'editors responsible for bringing the union into disrepute.' (R014) This was viewed as part of a concerted effort to exert control over the publication.
    2. One publication described feeling 'confined by so many seemingly pointless rules, and hav[ing] to fight to have basic things like featuring on the SU social media channels.' (R012)
    3. A publisher is 'extremely reluctant to publish anything that makes them or the university look bad' (R070) despite the publication's constitution explicitly stating it has a responsibility to hold both institutions to account.
    4. Multiple admin mistakes by an SU, as well as strict requirements for media law training, which took months to organise, meant one publication had 'a lot of difficulty starting up last year.' (R071)
    5. One publication experiences 'consistent pressure' (R057) from their publisher to use the publication as a platform to market the university's commercial events.
    6. A referendum was passed by one SU to increase oversight over the paper. 'It mandates the editor to give reports at council and makes them impeachable by the SU. Functionally, it does very little but it is very frustrating.' (R018)

- **Five publications gave no clear verdict on the publisher relationship. Two are written from a publisher's (SU) point of view, and the other three describe an arrangement that is purely logistical or too new to judge.**

Publication headcounts

- **65% (n=55) have a team of 50 or fewer**

36% (n=31) have a team of 20 or fewer

How many people make up your publication?		
1-5	3	3.53%
6-10	13	15.29%
11-20	15	17.65%
21-30	11	12.94%
31-50	13	15.29%
51-100	14	16.47%
101-200	11	12.94%
201+	5	5.88%
Total no. of publications	85	

How many people involved in running your publication are paid staff?		
0	77	90.59%
1	5	5.88%
2	2	2.35%
3	1	1.18%
Total no. of publications	85	

91% (n=77) of publications are run by volunteers

How publications publish

How is your publication published?		
In print	3	4.23%
In print, Online	16	22.54%
In print, Online, Social Media	32	45.07%
In print, Social Media	3	4.23%
In print, Online, Social Media, Podcast	2	2.82%
Online	11	15.49%
Online, Social Media	4	5.63%
Total no. of publications	71	

79% (n=56) of those who answered publish in some form of print

Only 21% (n=15) publish solely online

60% (n=39) of those who answered publish quarterly/once a term or more frequently

How often is your publication published?		
Weekly (during term)	4	6.15%
Fortnightly (during term)	8	12.31%
Monthly (during academic year)	7	10.77%
Quarterly/once a term	20	30.77%
Bi-annually	6	9.23%
Annually (Academic year)	9	13.85%
Other	11	16.92%
Total no. of publications	65	

How many issues (print/digital) do you publish?		
1	9	17.65%
2-3	15	29.41%
4-6	19	37.25%
7-9	5	9.80%
10+	3	5.88%
Total no. of publications	51	

*Answers taken from free-text responses

47% (n=24) of those who answered publish 3 or fewer issues a year

Has print output reduced? (not directly asked)		
Reduced	23	48.94%
Not reduced	7	14.89%
Increased	2	4.26%
New / restarted	2	4.26%
Mixed	4	8.51%
Not stated / unclear	9	19.15%
Total answered	47	

*Answers taken from free-text responses

49% (n=23) of the 47 respondent publications said their print output had reduced

Funding/cost of printing is the biggest reason for decline amongst the 30 respondents

Reasons cited for decline (not mutually exclusive)		
Funding / printing cost pressures	15	50.00%
Falling sales / reader interest in print	4	13.33%
Volunteer time, staffing or contributor capacity	7	23.33%
Covid-19 impact or legacy	2	6.67%
External/institutional constraints (SU, exams)	2	6.67%
Total mentions	30	

Approximately how large is your audience? (incl. print, online, social media, etc.)		
0-500	11	20.75%
500-1,000	12	22.64%
1,000-5,000	17	32.08%
5,000-10,000	3	5.66%
10,000-20,000	4	7.55%
20,000+	6	11.32%
Total	53	

75% (n=40) of the 53 respondents have an audience of 5,000 or fewer

Funding & budgets

Publications receive their funding from a range of sources. The funding models are set out in the table below, and the number of publications relying wholly or partly on each type of funding is shown on the next page.

What is the funding model of your publication?		
Allocation from the publisher	30	35.29%
Allocation from the publisher, Membership fees	7	8.24%
Advertising, Fundraising	5	5.88%
Allocation from the publisher, Advertising, Fundraising	5	5.88%
Fundraising	5	5.88%
Allocation from the publisher, Advertising	4	4.71%
Allocation from the publisher, Fundraising	4	4.71%
Allocation from the publisher, Advertising, Fundraising, Membership fees	3	3.53%
Advertising	2	2.35%
No funding	2	2.35%
Allocation from the publisher, Fundraising, Membership fees	2	2.35%
Self-funded	2	2.35%
Membership fees	2	2.35%
Advertising, Fundraising, Membership fees	1	1.18%
Advertising, Fundraising, Membership fees, Grants from guild	1	1.18%
Advertising, Fundraising, Membership fees, Sponsorship	1	1.18%
Advertising, Membership fees	1	1.18%
Advertising, paid events	1	1.18%
Allocation from the publisher, Membership fees, magazine sales	1	1.18%
Fundraising, Membership fees	1	1.18%
Fundraising, Publication sales	1	1.18%
Grant/self-funded	1	1.18%
Membership fees and private funding	1	1.18%
Print sales	1	1.18%
Sponsorship	1	1.18%
Total no. of publications	85	

66% (n=56) rely in whole or in part on an allocation from their publisher

Funding models snapshot based on responses	No. of pubs	% of 85
Publications who rely in whole or in part on **allocation from publisher**	56	65.88%
Publications who rely in whole or in part on **fundraising**	29	34.12%
Publications who rely in whole or in part on **advertising**	24	28.24%
Publications who rely in whole or in part on **membership fees**	21	24.71%
Publications who rely in whole or in part on **self-funding**	3	3.53%
Publications who rely in whole or in part on **selling publication copies**	3	3.53%

28% (n=24) rely in whole or in part on advertising

34% (n=29) rely in whole or in part on fundraising

47% (n=40) have a budget of £1,000 or more

How much is your annual budget to run your publication?		
£15,000+	3	3.53%
£10,000-£15,000	2	2.35%
£5,000-£10,000	13	15.29%
£2,000-£5,000	8	9.41%
£1,000-£2,000	14	16.47%
£500-£1,000	12	14.12%
£250-£500	8	9.41%
Under £250	7	8.24%
No budget	5	5.88%
Unknown	13	15.29%
Total no. of publications	85	

Funding cuts

- **Of the 55 publications that said this question applied to them, 25% (n=14) have experienced cuts.**

If you receive funding from your publisher, has this been cut in recent years?		
N/A (no funding received)	30	35.29%
No	29	34.12%
Yes	14	16.47%
Unsure/don't know/other	9	10.59%
Increased	3	3.53%
Total no. of publications	85	

*Categorised from free-text responses by the authorAnswers here do not map exactly onto the funding-model figures, as some publications described cuts to non-publisher funding and others with an allocation answered N/A.

Key points

- Some publications that had not experienced funding cuts mentioned precarious financial positions, such as where funding 'can be removed from us at any moment' (R012), grant processes that are 'difficult and [take] a while to process' (R034), and a bursary that isn't paid every year.
- One publication that had its funding cut partly blamed itself for 'not using its budget effectively to reach and engage with students to what was perceived as a satisfactory level by the Students' Union.' (R010)
- Another said that while it had experienced cuts, moving supplier allowed them to reduce the amount spent on printing and overall, the current funding 'is still a good settlement and does secure our operations' (R016). This was echoed by a separate publication that said it is 'still generously funded' (R019) despite cuts.
- One paper has had funding cut back 'massively' (R020), roughly halving over two years.
- Another lost all SU funding and had to crowdfund to survive.
- A third publication's funding is being cut by a significant amount annually.

Relationships with other student media

Is your publication officially linked with other student media at a university?		
Yes	11	23.40%
No	35	74.47%
Other	1	2.13%
Total no. of publications	47	

A clear majority of those who answered are not part of student media at their university

44% (n=29) of those who answered have worked with other publications in their university or locality

Does your publication work with other publications at your university/in your locality?		
Yes	7	10.61%
Sometimes	22	33.33%
No	37	56.06%
Total no. of publications	66	

Does your publication collaborate with other student media (TV or Radio)?		
Yes	21	24.71%
Sometimes	30	35.29%
No	34	40.00%
Total no. of publications	85	

60% (n=51) of all respondents have collaborated with student TV/Radio

How publications work with other publications:

- Collaborated for a publication swap-shop & other joint events
- Collaborated to share content and reach a wider audience
- Had articles published in professional local papers/specialist magazines
- Collaborated with local/national media outlets to advise on work
- Part of a larger publication (like a main campus paper)
- Shared team members

Diversity

An important caveat: answers given generally relied on the respondent's impressions and not on hard demographic data, which few publications collect. There was more confidence in stating observable characteristics, such as race and gender, than social class and economic status.

How diverse (spanning social class, race, gender, & economic status) do you think your publication's membership is?		
Extremely/Very diverse	25	35.71%
Fairly/Quite diverse	31	44.29%
Mixed - diverse on some fronts	9	12.86%
Not very diverse	2	2.86%
Other	3	4.29%
Total	70	

80% (n=56) of those who answered said their publications are diverse (to varying degrees)

*This question was added after the survey opened. It was mandatory from that point, so the 15 publications that responded earlier were not asked it.

Themes appearing in free-text responses	Count	% of 70
Good class/economic diversity	19	27.14%
Good racial/ethnic diversity at publication	18	25.71%
Female-majority publication	17	24.29%
No data/unsure of publication's demographics	12	17.14%
Majority white or race named as a weakness	12	17.14%
Minimal response and no supporting details	10	14.29%
Publication membership reflective of university	8	11.43%
Diverse leadership highlighted as a strength	7	10.00%
Class /economic status identified as a weakness	5	7.14%
Specifies a diversity initiative to address gaps	5	7.14%
Contributors concentrated within certain courses	5	7.14%
University demographics explain diversity gaps	4	5.71%
Diversity irrelevant as best work published	1	1.43%

*Categorised from free-text responses by the author, and covers all mentions across responses, which can have several.

Barriers to a more diverse membership

Question asked: What barriers do you think stand in the way of growing a more diverse membership at your publication?

Of the 37 responses received to this question, the following barriers were cited most often:

- Awareness and visibility
- Funding
- Niche focus of publication
- Elitist, intimidating, or cliquey perceptions
- Time and workload pressures

A small number reported facing no barriers at all.

Themes appearing in free-text responses	Count	% of 37
Lack of awareness/visibility	10	27.03%
Funding/resource issues	9	24.32%
Steps already taken/planned to diversify members	8	21.62%
Niche focus of publication deters wider interest	6	16.22%
Publication seen as intimidating, cliquey, or elitist	6	16.22%
Students unable to contribute due to studies/jobs	5	13.51%
Lack of institutional (uni/SU) support/recognition	4	10.81%
No barriers/question not relevant	4	10.81%
Lack of interest in student media from students	3	8.11%
Recruitment through word of mouth/friend groups	3	8.11%
Narrow recruitment pool (limited by course)	2	5.41%
Unpaid work not an option for some students	1	2.70%

*covers all mentions across responses, which can have several.

Challenges facing publications

What is the biggest challenge currently facing your publication?		
Funding & finances	30	46.88%
People: recruitment, retention & time	15	23.44%
Visibility, audience & relevance	11	17.19%
Leadership, structure & continuity	3	4.69%
Quality & AI use	2	3.13%
Other/unsure	2	3.13%
Institutional (SU) support	1	1.56%
Total no. of publications	64	

*primary challenge identified per response.

The single biggest challenge facing publications is funding, cited by 47% (n=30) of the 64 respondents. Percentages below are of those 64.

Overall, 53% (n=34) of publications raised funding as a challenge they were facing (not all said it was their single biggest challenge).

- Printing costs – 14% (n=9) said cost limits how often they print, how many copies they produce or how widely they circulate. As one editor put it, 'People do not understand how much it costs to physically print a newspaper and how little it leaves for anything else.' (R018)
- Independence and self-funding – 13% (n=8) are independent and/or fund themselves with no reliable income.
- Fundraising takes time – four publications said raising funds takes time away from journalism itself. As one respondent put it, 'our entire focus is not solely dedicated to the paper [...] but rather finding the funds to do so.' (R044)

- Advertising – five publications detailed the challenge of securing advertising, with one noting a 'move away from print advertising' (R053) amongst advertisers and another detailing the consequences of not securing sponsorship, which meant they 'paid out of pocket to keep the website running' (R049).
- Cuts – two publications explicitly cited funding cuts, with one explaining their publication is 'suffering from [a] University-wide funding decline' (R057).

People: recruitment, time and commitment

23% (n=15) reported difficulties in recruiting contributors, while 13% (n=8) described the pressure of balancing commitments to their publication alongside degrees, jobs, and placements. One editor detailed how team members' wellbeing had become 'a big focus of my job' (R059). Three mentioned the challenge of keeping contributors committed and meeting deadlines. Five mentioned a broader lack of interest in student media, with one concluding that 'the publishing culture on campus is just dead' (R012) after years of neglect.

Visibility and audience

17% (n=11) of publications described how too few students knew they existed or engaged with their content (print primarily). 6% (n=4) described a narrow or shrinking audience, being seen as a publication for a specific discipline or group, or losing readers through course cuts. In the case of one publication, this means 'our target audience is no longer there' (R081).

Relationships with Students' Unions and institutions

14% (n=9) mentioned difficult relationships with their Students' Union or university being a challenge, ranging from neglect and lack of support to disputes over funding. Four raised concerns about editorial independence, where reliance on union money can limit what they publish. As one respondent put it, 'affiliation with the Student Union carries the implication of a limit to what we are able to publish.' (R041)

Leadership and continuity

11% (n=7) identified problems with leadership and structure. These included editors appointed too late in the academic year, poor handover between committees, and too many unnecessary editorial roles. One paper described serious reputational damage suffered when an elected editor 'simply stopped doing work' (R018), an indication of the key role an editor fulfils in a publication.

Quality, skills and other issues

- A smaller number raised concerns about the quality of their journalism or a lack of training (3 each).
- Two mentioned writers using AI, and one had removed contributors for repeated AI use.
- Three cited the cost of websites, social media or software.
- Two said their publication is at risk of disappearing altogether, with 'very few writers, and very few readers' (R012) to blame in one instance. The second respondent, a specialist publication, was more nuanced, and didn't see that as a challenge given that 'publications and college societies have life cycles' (R013). They concluded that some publications are meant to be small, informal and short-lived, and growth isn't every publication's goal.

Themes appearing in free-text responses to publications' biggest challenges		
Funding/finance problems (incl. cuts & increased costs)	34	53.13%
Recruitment of contributors, editors & members	15	23.44%
Visibility, publicity & reaching readers	11	17.19%
Lack of SU/university support, neglect, or friction in the relationship	9	14.06%
Print runs limited by costs (impacting issue size, frequency, etc.)	9	14.06%
Balancing degrees and jobs (incl. burnout and wellbeing)	8	12.50%
Being independent and self-funding	8	12.50%
Leadership & continuity (incl. handover, structure, reliance on EIC)	7	10.94%
Struggle to secure advertising & sponsorship	5	7.81%
Low interest in student media on campus	5	7.81%
Fundraising burden (diverts time & creates uncertainty)	4	6.25%
Shrinking audience and narrow perception of who publication is for	4	6.25%
Quality work & AI use amongst contributors	3	4.69%
Lack of training on key skills such as media law	3	4.69%

*covers all mentions across responses, which can have several.



Compiled by Jack Walsh

Membership Officer 2026/27

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