

2025 SSAF Survey

Biennial Survey - Summary Report



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SSAF Biennial Survey – Summary Report

Introduction

The SSAF Biennial Survey – Summary Report presents the key findings, priorities, and insights gathered from the most recent survey of students enrolled at James Cook University's Australian campuses. This report fulfills the Higher Education Support Act (HESA) requirement for student consultation in determining priorities for the allocation of the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF), ensuring that student voices inform funding decisions. The aggregated results and report will be shared with key stakeholders.

Methodology

The survey was developed using existing instruments and administered via the Qualtrics® platform. It targeted all students enrolled at James Cook University's Australian campuses who were eligible to pay the Student Services and Amenities Fee (SSAF).

The instrument included 19 Likert-scale items aligned with legislated SSAF categories to assess student priorities and perceptions. Two open-ended questions were included to elicit qualitative insights into potential uses of SSAF funds and to provide depth and context to the quantitative data.

Approximately 13,500 eligible students were invited to participate via email, which contained the survey link and participant information. The survey remained open for three weeks (12 May – 1 June 2025). Promotion occurred during Orientation Week, through official social media, and via stakeholder engagement at meetings and events. Participation was voluntary. Ten respondents were randomly selected to receive gift vouchers as an incentive. Quantitative data were de-identified and cleaned, with incomplete responses excluded from analysis. Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations) and inferential tests (t-tests, chi-square) were conducted using Excel and SPSS.

Open-text responses were also cleaned, excluding non-responses or irrelevant entries (e.g. "nil", "n/a"). Thematic analysis was conducted in two stages. First, an AI language model applied a general inductive approach to automatically identify patterns and generate candidate themes based on semantic similarity and frequency. These were then reviewed and refined through human validation using a modified version of Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework to ensure coherence and accuracy. A secondary analysis, including sentiment analysis, was undertaken to identify potential variations in thematic patterns across gender and campus location.

All data handling complied with the Australian Privacy Act 2003. De-identified data are securely stored in accordance with institutional data governance protocols.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

The following data provides a breakdown of the respondents by demographic and academic context variables. *(Percentage of the population surveyed in italics in brackets).*

Response rate: There were 1785 responses, providing a response rate of approximately 13.7% (an increase of 5% on the survey conducted 2 years ago).

Gender: Female 73% (64%), Male 26% (35%), less than 1% identifying as X (other) (<1%)

Mode: Internal (on-campus) 80% (76%), External 14% (15%), mixed mode 6% (9%)

Campus: Townsville 69% (73%), Cairns 22% (18%), Brisbane 7% (7%), Mackay, Mt Isa & other 2% (~1%)

Disability: Disabled 10% (8%), non-disabled 90% (92%)

Indigenous: Indigenous 4% (5%), non-indigenous 96% (95%)

Ranking of Priorities

The Likert ratings provided by students were converted to scores of 'Not at all important' = 1 to 'Extremely important' = 5 and mean scores for each of the 19 included possible uses for SSAF funds were calculated.

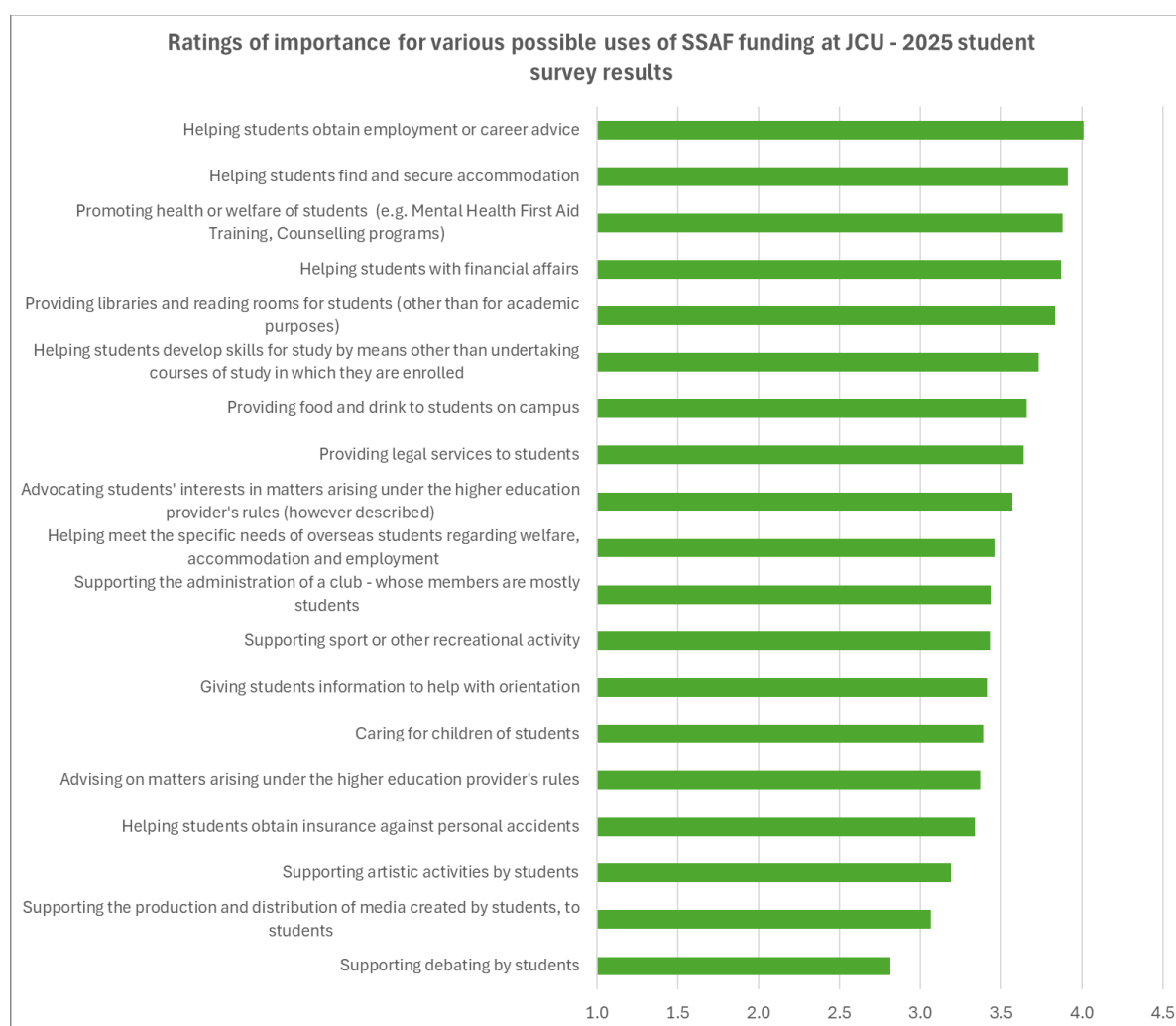


Figure: Mean ratings of the 'importance' of various potential uses of SSAF funds at JCU

SSAF CATEGORY Priority by survey	2025	DELTA	2023	2021	2019
Employment and Career Advice	1	1	2	2	2
Secure Accommodation	2	2	4	6	7
Health and Welfare	3	-2	1	1	1
Financial Affairs	4	1	5	4	3
Libraries and Reading Rooms (peer to peer spaces)	5	-2	3	3	4

Tests for differences in the importance ratings for the various possible uses of SSAF funds revealed very few differences in priorities across the student community based on either demographics (age, gender etc) or academic context (campus, course type, mode etc.). The strongest source of differences in importance ratings was between students of different ages.

Those students aged 25 and over gave higher ratings of importance than students aged 21 to 24 for the uses:

- Promoting health or welfare of students (e.g. Mental Health First Aid Training, Counselling programs)
- Advising on matters arising under the higher education provider's rules
- Supporting sport or other recreational activity, and
- Supporting debating by students.

While there were some significant differences in the ratings of some of the possible uses for SSAF funds, it should also be noted that each of the different age groups had the same top 5 priorities albeit in a slightly different order.

There were also some differences in the importance ratings of full-time compared to part-time students with full-time students rating the following uses as more important:

- Giving students information to help with orientation
- Advising on matters arising under the higher education provider's rules, and
- Helping students obtain employment or career advice.

Qualitative responses

There were 604 valid responses to **“Could you provide us with any general comments that help us to understand your priorities?”**.

Note: An additional response was received via email with permission to include content within the qualitative analysis. Specific feedback on services is deidentified and shared on an aggregated basis with the relevant service providers for quality improvement purposes.

Key theme on priority "general comments"	Mentions	Notes
Mental Health and Wellbeing	188	The most dominant theme. Students emphasised the importance of accessible counselling, psychological support, and mental health awareness. Many comments directly linked wellbeing to academic performance and retention.
Financial Support	153	A high volume of responses called for emergency assistance, fee relief, textbook subsidies, and general financial hardship support. Cost of living pressures were frequently mentioned.
Recreation and Social Life	107	Students want more opportunities to engage socially through clubs, sporting events, and campus activities. Social engagement was linked to a sense of belonging and mental wellbeing.
Employment and Career	98	There is a strong desire for more structured career services, job readiness support, and opportunities for part-time on-campus work. Many feel unprepared for the job market.
Food and Cost of Living	60	Free or subsidised food programs were widely supported, especially breakfast/lunch provisions. Some students expressed they regularly attend university hungry.

The second question requested **“examples for SSAF funded projects”**. A categorised summary of these is available in **Appendix A** (found at the end of this report).

Students were also asked for their source of SSAF information. The largest proportion of respondents noted they received information from multiple sources, with the JCU website being the most popular. Of note, there were a number of students who were not familiar with SSAF.

Analysis

The 2025 SSAF Student Survey reveals a clear shift in what students expect from their university experience. While health and welfare services remain important, they've been overtaken by a growing demand for employment and career-related support. Students are increasingly focused on practical outcomes — particularly anything that can improve their job prospects or financial stability during and after their studies.

Housing affordability and cost-of-living pressures continue to be major concerns. Calls for more financial support were common, and many students highlighted the need for direct, accessible assistance — whether through emergency relief, subsidies, or help navigating housing and living expenses.

Mental health and wellbeing were also prominent across the survey, especially among women and mature-aged students. There's a strong push for better counselling access, more inclusive support (especially for neurodiverse and remote learners), and a wider range of wellness services. These aren't just seen as extras — they're viewed as essential to staying in study.

Students also made it clear that social connection matters. Clubs, events, and peer-led activities were frequently mentioned, not just for fun, but as a way to feel part of a community. This is particularly important for wellbeing and for building a sense of belonging. That said, a number of students studying online or in hybrid mode expressed frustration — many felt disconnected from these benefits and questioned whether SSAF offers them fair value.

Finally, students with disabilities and those undertaking HDR (Higher Degree by Research) programs raised specific issues around accessibility and equity. They called for more targeted support, clearer communication, and greater transparency in how SSAF funds are allocated — particularly around who benefits and how decisions are made.

Appendix A. Summary of SSAF Funded Project Suggestions (All Campuses)

Infrastructure & Campus Facilities

- Need more concrete carparks / better parking / improved parking availability and quality of roads
- Modernise campus facilities (roads, carparks)
- Better car parks
- Improved access to library and study spaces
- Provide more private study spaces and group collaboration rooms
- More microwaves and kitchen areas for students
- More sporting facilities, track field, swimming pool
- Better gym equipment (Cairns gym in poor state)
- Fix campus roads and lighting in car parks
- More individual study pods
- Create additional quiet study spaces
- Library renovation and media rooms renovation
- More art/non-study spaces on campus
- Revamp the Cairns library
- More microwaves around Medicine campus
- Better and more parking
- University pool, improved cycling infrastructure, road and mountain biking clubs
- Digitalising student cards
- Improve technology (Improve app functionality, improve sound systems in classrooms, update lab facilities)

Food & Cost of Living Support

- Longer cafe hours
- More free food events (weekly midweek mingle, free breakfasts and lunches, free UP&GO for medical students)
- Cold drinks/ice cream trucks at events
- Student pantry for financially struggling students
- Subsidised meals or meal plans
- More vending machines/snack bars
- Free sanitary products in bathrooms
- Free coffee at student centre
- Food stalls on multiple days of the week

Mental Health & Wellbeing

- Expanded mental health support, including 24/7 telehealth and wellness workshops
- Free counselling for students
- Workshops on mental health first aid
- Specific mental health support for neurodivergent students and ADHD coaching
- Animal-assisted activities (yoga with animals, opportunities to spend time with pets)
- Chill-out/seclusion room to prevent overstimulation

Career Development & Employability

- Career guidance and career fairs
- Resume and interview coaching classes
- Short certification courses (RSA, First Aid, Barista training)
- Volunteering Support Program and 'Experience Bank' platform
- Business complex for business students
- Greater subsidies for students undertaking rural placements
- More industry networking opportunities

- Subsidised professional development courses

Community & Social Connection

- Gala night for graduation
- Mid-week mingles and more frequent community events
- Sports and social tournaments
- Music concerts, cultural fests, arts workshops
- Student newspaper
- Orientation sessions specifically for postgrads and external students
- Multicultural annual events
- Buddy/mentor programs for new and international students
- Ball or major event bringing together students from all degrees
- More opportunities for online students to participate in community (packs, events)

Equity & Access

- Support for students with children (childcare facilities on campus, after-school care)
- Support for external students (regional study hubs, subsidised travel/accommodation for placements or intensives)
- Placement subsidies
- Support for students experiencing placement poverty
- Book allowances for PhD students
- Affordable housing/accommodation support
- Support for students with learning disabilities

Sustainability

- Climate initiatives on campus
- Implement reduce-reuse-recycle framework at SSAF-funded events
- Bring back community garden activities and events

Other Ideas

- Indoor sports facilities (Cairns campus)
- Gaming room (like UTS)
- Music room/orchestra/band for Cairns campus
- Integration events (team-based games with prizes)
- Student-run kitchens offering cheap meals
- University-organised trips (e.g. Crystal Creek, Billabong Sanctuary)
- Accessible event promotion and awareness
- Student-led innovation or sustainability projects
- Genealogy project linking personal history to resilience and academic success

FURTHER INFORMATION

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