

Trading Insight

March 2026

Inside:

- *Emerging pressures on the UK food and drink sector*
- *Why partnering with students is key to the night-time economy*
- *A tale of two tastings*
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- *Brecon-Carreg nature reserve*

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Middle East Conflict: Emerging Pressures on the UK Food and Drink Sector

It doesn't seem that long ago that we were all dealing with the highest food inflation spike for consumers in 45 years after the war broke out between Russia and Ukraine. Now, global tensions are once again having a knock-on effect on the UK economy.

If the conflict in the Middle East continues, what potential impacts could this have on the UK food and drink industry?

Rising prices back on the radar

Even though we don't import huge amounts of our food directly from the Persian Gulf, grocery inflation is expected to creep up again - possibly reaching around 5%.

Suppliers are facing higher costs to manufacture, package, store and transport goods and those costs tend to make their way through the chain eventually.

Possible shortages (and some surpluses)

Depending on how the conflict develops, we could see some shifts in availability of certain nuts and dried fruits as

these rely heavily on routes affected by the war and are one of Iran's main non-oil exports.

However, we may also see more availability of products like beef or poultry and potentially cheaper prices as some shipments scheduled for the Middle-East are redirected to Europe.

Shipping in the Strait of Hormuz

The Strait of Hormuz is one of the world's most important shipping routes and when the routes get disrupted, the effects spread quickly.

This means ships may need to reroute, which takes longer and costs more or some companies may need to suspend shipments which could lead to product shortages.

Fertiliser costs will increase

A lot of global fertiliser (or the raw materials needed to make it) comes from or passes through the Middle East. Coupled with the rise in fuel costs, this means farming will get more expensive, which filters through the supply chain and could lead to higher grocery prices later this year.

Longer-term pressure on household budgets

If the conflict continues, experts think it could turn into a wider cost-of-living issue later in the year. Food and drink prices may take longer to catch up - but they usually do. The last thing students need!

This could mean customers sticking to essentials, more interest in value ranges, and fewer impulse purchases.

Preparing for the longer-term impacts will help you to manage stock, reduce waste, and support students as much as possible.

What can SUs do mitigate the impacts?

Keep an eye on stock: Some items may go in and out of availability.

Expect price increases: Most of our listed suppliers can only submit price increases once a year. The exceptions are those in the catering, stationery and household, and health and beauty categories, who

may request quarterly increases under exceptional circumstances.

Because rises in food and drink costs will take time to filter through, we could see price changes on 1 July, when all other categories are permitted to submit their annual increase.

Minimise waste: With rising costs, every bit of good stock counts!

Supplier deliveries: Suppliers may look to consolidate deliveries to reduce costs so try and be flexible where possible.

Keep in touch: If you need any advice or guidance on products or supplier services, email the [Trading Team](#) and we'll do our best to help.

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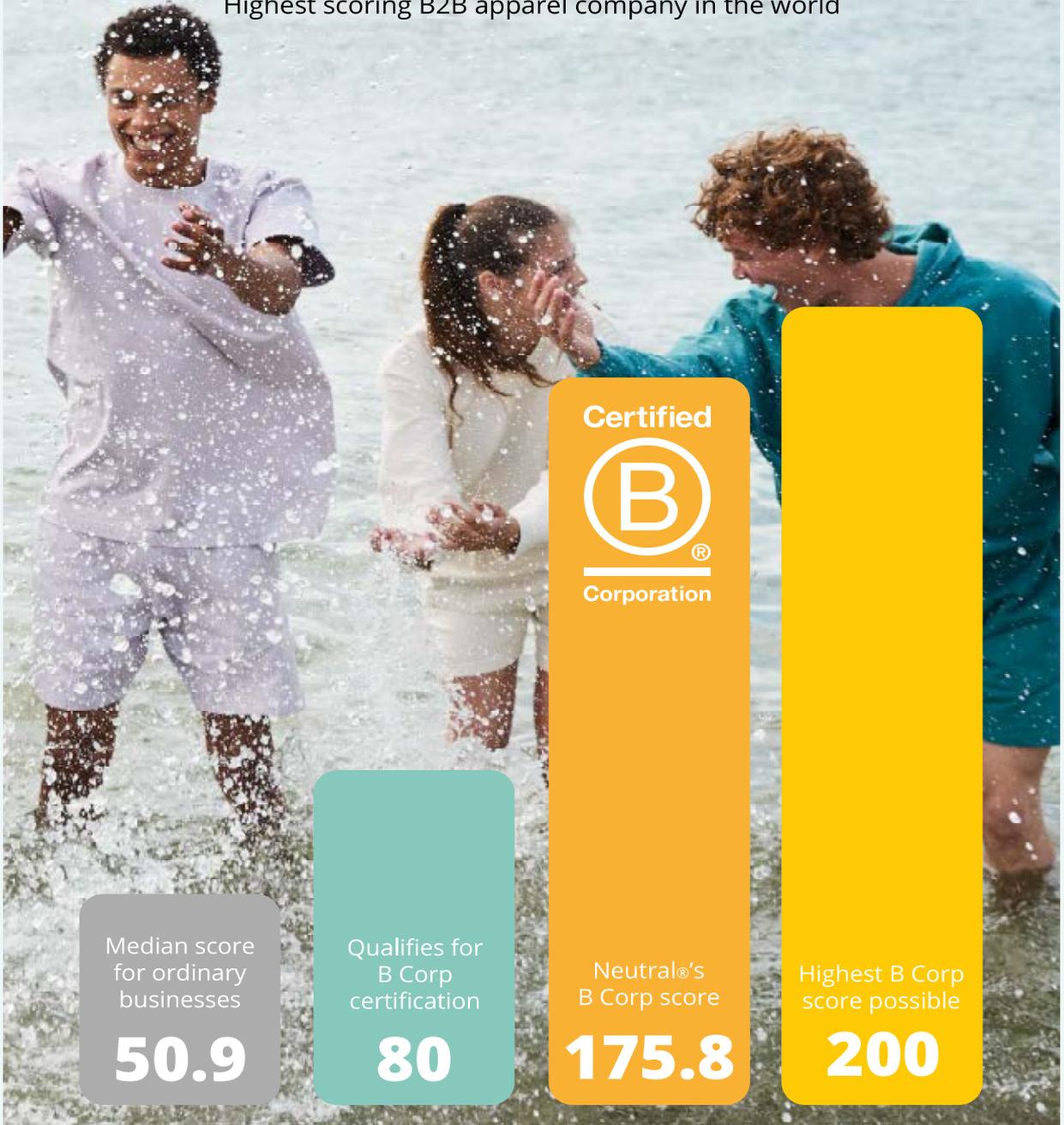


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Lighting the Future After Dark Partnership with Students Is Key to a Time Economy

Michael Kill, CEO, Night Time Industries Association

A thriving night-time economy does far more than support high streets. It actively shapes economic geography, cultural identity and long-term competitiveness. From a students' union perspective, this matters profoundly, because students are not just consumers of the night-time economy, they are one of its most important stakeholders and future custodians.

Students do not choose universities based solely on league tables. They choose places where life exists beyond lectures, where culture, community and opportunity extend into the evening. In the same way, fintech firms, creative industries and knowledge-economy employers no longer locate purely on rent or tax incentives. They locate where young, skilled workforces want to live. Work-life balance, cultural vibrancy and a strong night-time offer are now core economic attractors. A city that closes at 6pm does not attract global talent. A city that comes alive after dark does.

Before people decide where to go out, they decide whether to go out at all. That decision is shaped by the foundational experience: clean streets, good lighting, welcoming public spaces, visible and reliable transport, and a clear, safe route home. These are not aesthetic choices, they are economic and social infrastructure. For students, particularly those new to a city, confidence is everything. When streets feel neglected, confidence collapses. When lighting is poor, fear replaces curi-

osity. When transport is unreliable, people leave early or do not come at all. Confidence, once lost, is extremely difficult to rebuild.

Transport is not just about movement; it is a safety enabler that shapes behaviour. When people know how they are getting home, trust that services are reliable and feel confident they will not be stranded, they plan differently, stay longer and feel safer. Late-night transport reduces congestion at closing time, street conflict and risk-taking behaviour. But it only works when it is co-designed and co-activated. From a student union perspective, transport planned in isolation consistently fails. It succeeds when venues, transport authorities, local authorities and users, including students, are part of the same system.

Night-time economies work best when the sector and its users are present at the tables where decisions are made. That means nightlife, hospitality, cultural organisations and student bodies sitting on transport committees, shaping development and investment decisions, embedded in multi-agency safety briefings and actively influencing cultural and regeneration strategies. When lived experience is missing, policy fails at delivery. Transport does not align with real operating hours, public realm investment ignores how people actually move at night, and safety strategies prioritise control over confidence. This is not about special treatment;

ark: Why Partner- a Thriving Night-

ssociation

it is about designing policy that reflects reality.

The night-time economy is fragile not because of one policy lever, but because multiple pressures converge at once. Since 2020, operating costs have risen by 30–40%. Employer National Insurance changes have significantly increased staffing costs. Entry-level employment, so vital for students, has become more expensive, while capital for reinvestment has largely disappeared. Within this context, business rates remain a structural pressure that must be addressed intelligently. What is needed is targeted, marginal relief that recognises cultural and community value, protects independent and grassroots venues and supports the most fragile parts of the ecosystem. This is about safeguarding cultural infrastructure, not propping up inefficiency.

Culture is what transforms a functioning city into a destination. Live music, performance, comedy, theatre and events extend activity beyond retail, increase safety through presence, attract diverse audiences and build emotional attachment. Since 2020, 26% of late-night venues have closed. When a venue closes, we do not just lose a business; we lose cultural memory, community identity and future opportunity. These losses are felt deeply by students, for whom culture after dark is central to belonging.

If we are serious about safety, inclusion and wellbeing, this cannot be delivered through tokenism. Not posters in toilets or one-off

training sessions. It must be embedded into the DNA of the night-time economy, as fundamental as licensing and commercial viability.

Initiatives such as [Night Safe Spaces Accreditation](#) and [Listen for Life](#) show how the sector is already moving in this direction, but real progress depends on partnership rather than compliance.

If the night-time economy is a product, partnership is how we design it. Councils, BIDs, transport providers, police, hospitality, cultural organisations and student communities must work together to create clean, welcoming streets, safe and well-lit public spaces, reliable transport and strong cultural programming. This is how we generate return visits, community ownership, workforce loyalty, investor confidence and global relevance.

The night-time economy is not a luxury. It is essential infrastructure for jobs, culture, community and global competitiveness. We are at a crossroads. We can manage decline through fragmentation and caution, or we can build confidence through co-design, partnership and belief. If we get the foundations right, embed culture and safety into our DNA, and truly work together, we can light up our high streets, inspire the next generation and secure Britain's future after dark.



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A TALE OF TWO TASTINGS...

Over the past couple of months, students across the UK have been sampling bopa coolers, blondie hot chocolate, winter warmers and some bold vodka flavours! Here's what they had to say...

SIMPLY

Scale: 1 is not so great and 5 is amazing

Dragon fruit and mango cooler with mango boba

37% gave it 3

63% gave it 4 or 5

"Tastes great and very refreshing"

"I actually really like this because the mango isn't overpowered by the dragon fruit and it just compliments each other well"

Gingerbread blondie hot chocolate

40% scored it a 4

40% scored it a 5

"Tasted really, really good, gingerbread flavour was nice but not overpowering".

"Needs a biscuit but otherwise perfect".

Tropical Cooler

29% scored it 3

71% scored it 4 or 5

The staff making the drinks said it was great, easy to make, and tasted fab.

"Will definitely enjoy this during the warmer months".

Spiced Apple Winter Warmer

12% gave it 3

44% gave it 4 or 5

Mixed reviews: Many students enjoyed its cosy, festive apple-and-spice flavour and warming aroma, describing it as 'comforting' and 'seasonal'. However, others found it too sweet, syrupy, or lacking depth, with a few saying it tasted diluted or slightly alcoholic.

On a scale of 1 – 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is fantastic, 56% scored the Simply branding above 4.

All the students thought the aroma of all the Simply products were amazing. 77% said they would buy the product with 72% saying they would recommend it to others.

Students said they would be prepared to pay:
Boba: £3.90–£4.50, Hot chocolate: £3.00, Winter Warmer: £2.10–£2.50.
(average based on total responses)



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On a scale of 1 – 5 where 1 is poor and 5 is fantastic, **73%** scored the AU branding above 4.

Scale: 1 is not so great and 5 is amazing

Blue Raspberry Vodka

15% gave it 3

76% gave it 4 or 5

"It tasted like blue slush puppy or everything from the 90's"

"I'm not normally a fan of raspberry but this was good!"

Strawberry Burst Vodka

47% scored it a 4

37% scored it a 5

"Love how it's like actual strawberries and not melted Haribo"

"Neat, it is very smooth which is appealing, and the taste is quite sweet in a good way".

Blue Raspberry RTD

30% scored it 3

59% scored it 4 or 5

'nostalgic', 'classic', 'dangerously like pop'

"Blue raspberry flavour is less potent than in the actual bottle of vodka".

Juicy Peach RTD

24% gave it 3

58% gave it 4 or 5

This flavour received mixed reviews from 'refreshing', 'not too sweet', 'suited to summer' to 'artificial' too sweet' and 'sticky'.

Cherryade RTD

27% scored it 3

57% scored it 4 or 5

"Like the cherryade you'd have at birthday parties as a kid".

"Oh yeah, this would go down too well at a party".

70% said they would buy the product with students willing to pay between £3.00 - £5.00 (based on average of total responses for shots, singles, doubles and cans). Just over half (56%) of students asked said they would be more likely to purchase the range if it was prominently displayed behind the bar.

75% said the range would work well in cocktails and spirit mixer serves.



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How The Retailer Group Supports SUs in Retail and Hospitality



For over 15 years, The Retailer Group has helped Students' Unions design, build, and improve shops, cafés, and social spaces. From cutting edge cashierless stores to low-cost refreshes, we deliver flexible, future-ready solutions that boost engagement and performance. As a strategic NUS Services partner, we're committed to adding value in retail, hospitality and in web and graphic design creation.

Contact: gordon@theretailer.co.uk

Web: www.theretailer.co.uk

Nature's Gift: Brecon Carreg Wildlife Reserve in the Brecon Beacons

In a landmark move for nature conservation in Wales, bottled mineral water company Brecon Carreg has gifted 80 acres of ecologically rich land within the Brecon Beacons National Park to the Initiative for Nature Conservation Cymru (INCC). The donation marks the creation of a new wildlife reserve, now flourishing as a haven for endangered species and diverse habitats.

A Landscape Rich in Biodiversity
The donated land encompasses an exceptional variety of natural environments, including marshy grassland, meadow, river, scrub, broadleaved woodland, heathland, and scree. This patchwork of landscapes offers essential refuge for an array of flora and fauna, making it a significant conservation stronghold in the region.

Wildlife in Residence

This rich ecological setting already supports a number of notable species. Early wildlife surveys have already recorded the presence of otters, badgers, and the elusive Horseshoe bat, alongside avian species such as the Cuckoo, Nightjar, Pied Flycatcher, and Ring Ouzel. On evening walks, the soft glimmer of Glow Worms can be seen lighting up the reserve. The presence of the rare Petty Whin plant further highlights the site's botanical importance.

Practical Conservation in Action

In collaboration with INCC, Brecon Carreg has supported a suite of proactive measures aimed at improving habitats and supporting native wildlife. To date, these include:

- A purpose-built Horseshoe bat roost - already being used by bats.
- Installation of 50 Dormouse nest boxes and 30 nest boxes for Pied Flycatchers
- Erection of a Barn Owl nesting box
- Placement of 10 bat roost towers to increase shelter opportunities

Each initiative is part of a carefully managed conservation strategy designed to reverse the decline of key species.

A Pond for the Future

In April 2025, the reserve welcomed a group of students and volunteers who took part in a field-based conservation project. Their primary task: digging a wildlife pond in the marshy grassland.

g's 80-Acre on Beacons

The new aquatic feature is designed to attract and support species such as frogs, newts, and grass snakes. In addition, a small stone wall was built along the pond's edge, providing a basking spot for reptiles and shelter for amphibians.

Looking Ahead: Crayfish Reintroduction

One of the most ambitious goals on the horizon is the reintroduction of the native White-clawed Crayfish, now critically endangered in the UK. Before this can take place, however, the site must be tested for Crayfish Plague, a lethal fungal pathogen. Water samples are currently being analysed, and if the reserve is found to be plague-free, this rare freshwater species could make a comeback in Welsh waters.

Sustainable Land Stewardship

In a nod to sustainable and natural land management, six hectares of marshy grassland have been fenced off to allow cattle grazing. This traditional method helps maintain plant diversity and prevents habitat overgrowth, creating conditions in which native wildlife can thrive.



A Legacy in the Making

With the support of Brecon Carreg, this new reserve not only preserves the natural character of the Brecon Beacons but also provides a platform for ecological education, community involvement, and species recovery. Ongoing updates and conservation milestones will be shared through Brecon Carreg's [website](#) and social media channels - an open invitation for the public to witness nature's resilience in action.



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Brecon Carreg began life as a true cottage industry on the Llwyndewi Farm over **45 years ago**. Look closely and you'll spot it on our labels! The cottage has since become our HQ where our close knit team proudly bring Brecon Carreg to life on a daily basis



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USEFUL vs LOYAL

Loyalty schemes have become a go-to strategy for hospitality and retail operators looking to drive repeat visits. From subscription models to tiered points systems, brands are continually refreshing their approach to keep customers engaged, spending, and choosing them above others in a crowded marketplace.

But does this logic work for students' unions?

More than 20 million people now carry a Tesco Clubcard - a clear indicator that loyalty programmes can be powerful drivers of repeat behaviour. But the student experience is different. Our audience is transient, typically with us for only a few years, and as young adults, they're in a period of discovery. They're not looking to form deep, long-term consumer loyalties in the same way older demographics might.

Instead of asking how we can make students more loyal to our venues, perhaps we should focus on becoming the one place they simply can't do without - the place they choose over other venues because their students' union offers something they can't get anywhere else.

USEFULNESS OVER LOYALTY

Students may be locking in lifetime loyalty with the brands they regularly order at our bars and venues, but what keeps them coming back to their students' union is the fact that we're really useful!

And when we're more useful than our competitors, we have the edge. When we stop being the most useful choice, no loyalty card in the world will work.

WHAT MAKES STUDENTS' UNIONS SO USEFUL?

Students' unions are uniquely placed within the student experience. We're not just another

er venue or commercial operator - we're a support system, a community hub, and an advocate.

Here's what sets us apart:

- **An Independent Voice for Students** – Our job isn't to protect the university's reputation; it's to protect and amplify the student voice.
- **Support and Advice Services** - We're often the first place students turn to when they need help.
- **Clubs, Societies, and Activities** - We create the spaces for students to meet friends, try new things, and discover experiences that stay with them long after graduation.
- **A Sense of Belonging** - Particularly for new students; the SU provides connection, familiarity, and a place to feel safe.

Loyalty schemes can be a useful way to encourage repeat visits, but in students' unions they should never overshadow the real reason students return. While retail and hospitality brands depend on points, perks, and subscriptions to keep customers engaged, students' unions thrive when they're seen as essential to a great student experience. Loyalty programmes can support engagement, but they aren't what creates long lasting connection; students come back because their SU supports them, represents them, and makes their lives easier.



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BIG DASH Lime is sharp, zesty and bright. Cuts through and wakes up your tastebuds in between lectures, after the gym, or alongside a meal deal.

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My experience at NTIA Summit



I recently had the pleasure of attending the Night Time Industries Association (NTIA)

Summit, and it

proved to be one of the

most energising and insightful events I've attended (excluding NUS Trade Convention of course).

The room brought together people from every corner of the night time economy from politicians and policy specialists to bar teams, security operators, venue directors and brand leaders. That mix alone created a real sense of shared purpose and momentum.

The Summit featured keynote speeches from Andy Burnham and Angela Rayner, both emphasising the cultural and economic importance of the night time sector. Alongside that were a series of panels that dug into the challenges and opportunities facing nightlife, hospitality and culture. I was genuinely flattered to be invited

by Jason Fox of Foxpro events to join one of these panels, alongside Rebecca Evans (Head of Events, Programming & Venues at Bristol SU), Rebecca Mottershaw from Global Brands, and Dan Ickowitz Seidler, Director of Propaganda Venues and part owner of the very viral XOYO nightclub. Our discussion centred on the future of student venues and the wider narrative around the student demographic.

There was wide agreement that students haven't abandoned nightlife - in fact - far from it. What has changed are their expectations: safety, value, relevance and atmosphere now carry more weight than ever. Students are still going out, but they're being more intentional, choosing fewer but better nights, and prioritising spaces that feel welcoming, inclusive and culturally meaningful.

We also talked about the long term implications. If the sector doesn't evolve, it risks losing not just student spend, but the next generation of promoters, creatives and operators who will shape the future of the night time economy. But the tone in the room was optimistic and it was felt

the

that confidence is returning, especially in student focused venues that have invested in identity, programming and quality. As an industry, if we can meet students where they are and rebuild trust, there's a huge opportunity for renewal.

Overall, the Summit reinforced for me that we're not witnessing the decline of student nightlife but a reset. With the right focus on safety, innovation and belonging, we can build spaces that truly resonate with the student market and re-energise the sector for years to come.

Adam Parton, NUS Charity Trading Support



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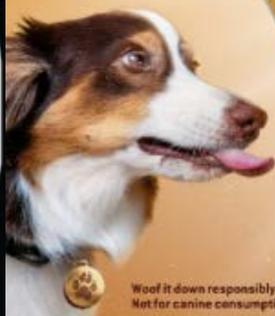


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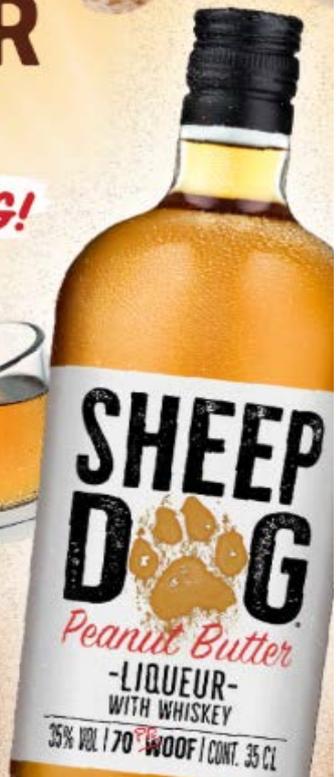
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Building a future-ready finance function for Royal Holloway Students' Union

Royal Holloway Students' Union (RHSU) sits at the heart of student life, delivering representation, advice, events, societies, and managing multiple commercial venues across campus. Operating in a complex, fast-moving environment, the SU saw its legacy finance systems struggle to keep pace with growth. The team recognised that through technology innovation, manual processes and disconnected platforms could be removed, to create a more efficient finance function.

RHSU partnered with 4PointZero to design and implement a modern, cloud-based finance ecosystem. Together, they shaped a clear vision for seamless system integration, automated processing, robust controls, and multidimensional reporting, enabling real-time insight into performance across departments, venues, and societies.

Working closely with 4PointZero, RHSU evaluated a range of leading accounting

solutions before selecting three core platforms: Twinfield for secure, scalable accounting and governance, Basecone for automated invoice processing and approval workflows, and Ezora for real-time analytics and seamless daily operational postings. 4PointZero led the implementation rollout, from data migration to system setup and workflow design, supported by bespoke training and a dedicated two-month Hypercare period to support the team and embed new working processes.

The new systems automate many routine tasks, allowing the finance team to spend less time on manual work and more time on strategic activities. As the new system and processes embed, the team have noticed the positive benefits of having an integrated system that supports better decision-making and more effective resource planning through automated management reporting.

“Modernising our financial systems is already making a meaningful difference to the way we work. We still have a long way to go, as system and process changes take time to embed. We're now much closer to having clearer insights, ready to implement stronger controls and have reduced some manual processes, with further improvements planned over time. SUs are complex, particularly when managing group finances alongside high-volume commercial activity, so it's a challenging process to implement new systems, as well as keep business as usual going. We're optimistic overtime we'll streamline more of our processes and gain more efficiencies.

“The support from 4PointZero throughout implementation and Hypercare has given us the confidence to adopt new ways of working quickly and successfully. The team is responsive, helpful, and always willing to support us with our questions and queries.”
Min Chauhan, Head of Finance and Resources

4Pointzero help Student Union's overcome finance IT challenges

At 4PointZero, our team of finance experts, technology specialists, and systems accountants delivers tailored solutions for Student Union's. Working with leading software providers, we streamline financial processes and eliminate system inefficiencies.

How we help Student Unions



Review and assess your current financial IT operations.



Identify opportunities to save time and automate key processes.



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