



Student First Report

Prioritising the
Academic Lives of
Student Intercounty
Players



MY VISION FOR GPA STUDENT MEMBERS IS

SUPPORTING STUDENT MEMBERS TO THRIVE IN THEIR ACADEMIC STUDIES AND AS AN ATHLETE FOR THEIR COLLEGE, COUNTY & CLUB

It's a great honour to reflect the collective voice of the players once again, in this report on behalf of the students who now represent 35% of the GPA membership overall. Our student members continue to do a fantastic job balancing their studies, Inter-county commitments, college sport, part-time jobs, friendships, relationships and more. It is important we continue to measure and evaluate their experiences, and adapt the priorities and work of the GPA accordingly to serve their needs.

'Student First', the name of the report, reflects a refocusing on the importance of their academic pursuits. Inter-county players are elite amateur athletes, and that status requires strong protections; their Inter-county or college sporting participation should not be to the detriment of their professional career, of which their college experience is the first meaningful step. Academic achievement will have a life-long impact on their quality of life.

However, players continue to develop a host of life skills through their college experience, in managing all their demands, an important part of their holistic development that we shouldn't overlook or seek to remove altogether. Where members wish to participate in college sport, the GPA believe they should be fully supported to do so by all parties that have a role in their sporting career; it is a unique, developmental and enjoyable experience that is important to the vast majority of GPA student members. A lot has changed since the last GPA Student Report in 2019 and it has driven a lot of progress which you can see summarised later in this report. Most notably, the integration of the GPA with the WGPA happened in 2020, which effectively meant an 80% rise in membership. The GPA has absorbed this change and extended all services and supports equally across 4,000 members, within the existing resources available. The next aim is

to grow supports to previous levels, in line with growing demands from our members and in particular students, who are typically our most vulnerable cohort.

Players continue to face the ongoing financial challenges associated with the cost of travel, accommodation and food, exacerbated by their lack of available time to complete part-time work and an ongoing cost of living crisis. Growing financial supports to a level which enables players to fulfil their academic potential, while maximising their sporting pursuits is imperative. No-one should be left behind due to their economic ability to participate fully.

We have engaged with various groups involved with our student members and it is clear there is a big role for the GPA to play in managing engagements with them and on their behalf, to empower everyone involved to support the development and protect the welfare of student members. To that end, Brian Howard was appointed as dedicated GPA Education Manager in 2023 and I'm excited to see the positive impact that Brian's energy and fresh ideas will have in this area. Brian and the GPA team will build a plan of work to implement the recommendations within this report in the coming years, ensuring that whilst in third-level education, every GPA member has the academic, financial and structural support to thrive as a student first.



GPA CEO



REPORT SUMMARY

DETAILS

First update on students since 2019



4 Focus Groups with 20 players

967 Survey Responses (M&F)



DEMOGRAPHICS

35%

of GPA members are Students



26%

Study Education (Most popular subject)



72%

Play College Sport



22.7

is the Average Age of Student Members



KEY FINDINGS

63%

regularly overwhelmed by commitments



62%

feel they don't have time for part-time work

84%

had to turn down jobs for sporting commitments

84%

feel playing college sport is important



27%

regularly missing class for sporting commitments

32%

are experiencing serious financial difficulty



62%

said County Managers provide most pressure in Jan/Feb

59%

rate college academic/sport communication as poor

32%

are regularly torn between College & County

RECOMMENDATIONS

MITIGATE

the impact of sport on academic studies

PROVIDE

greater financial support to student members

SAFEGUARD

members' experiences of playing third level Gaelic Games

NEXT STEPS

Convene a GPA Student Working Group

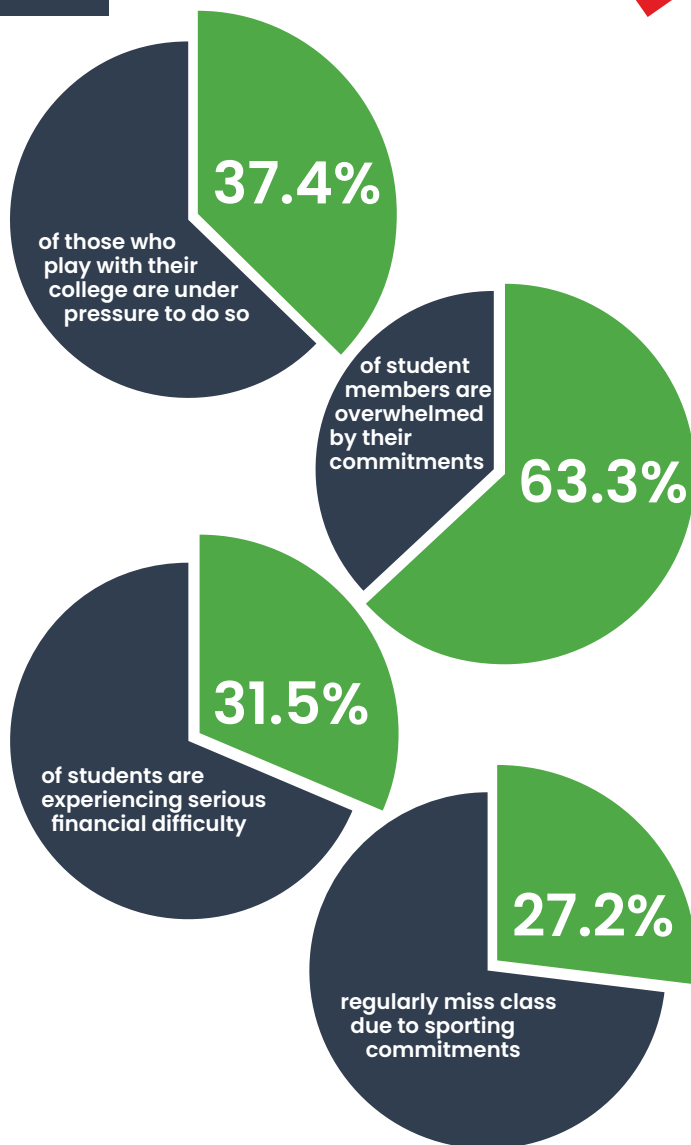
Develop and Implement an Action Plan Based on Report Recommendations

EXPERIENCES AND CHALLENGES FOR STUDENT MEMBERS

84.2% of students feel playing sport at college is important but a lower proportion (71.6%) currently play for their college. **37.4% of those who play with their college are under pressure to do so.** For 61.8% of students, intercounty managers provide the most pressure to play during the college competition season and **31.5% of students are regularly torn between their college and county playing commitments.** Players who are well supported by and have flexibility from their intercounty manager are more likely to play for their college team.

63.4% of students are working although 62.1% feel they don't have time to do so, which compounds the challenges they experience in their studies and wellbeing. **84.4% of the respondents have had to turn down jobs due to sporting commitments,** 81.6% report that this has had a financial impact on them and their family. Students train on average four times per week and travel home to train on average three times per week, which presents significant additional time and financial demands. Almost all students are experiencing serious (31.5%) or some (61.4%) financial difficulty, and this is more apparent for female players.

63.3% of student members are overwhelmed by their commitments and experiencing an impact on their engagement with their studies with **27.2% regularly missing class due to sporting commitments.** Student's lives are hectic and they are likely not fulfilling their potential academically due to their sporting commitments. Students feel awareness, communication and support for their sporting commitments within the academic environment could be improved; communication between college sporting and academic units was rated adequate or poor by 58.5% of respondents. Finally, there are notable pinch points for student members around placement, final year, college competitions and exam times.



RECOMMENDATIONS AND ACTIONS

1

MITIGATE THE IMPACT OF SPORT ON ACADEMIC STUDIES FOR STUDENT MEMBERS

Reposition academic endeavour and achievement at the centre of GPA student related activity

Expand, and build greater awareness and engagement with the GPA Player Development Programme (BEO360) to include more academic supports for student members

Contribute to the wider roll out of 'best practice' supports for all student members in higher education through and with players, sport and academic units

Include important academic timepoints for student members, such as placement, final year, and exams, in decision making and advocacy around student members

2

PROVIDE GREATER FINANCIAL SUPPORT TO STUDENT MEMBERS

Seek additional investment to enhance the annual student scholarship to reflect the time constraints around part time work for student members and the inclusion of female players in the existing GPA scholarship programme

Develop an accountable and sustainable resource to support students with significant financial difficulties

3

SAFEGUARD MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES OF PLAYING THIRD LEVEL GAELIC GAMES

Work with the HEC, MSW and other relevant stakeholders to enshrine third level competitions in the overall fixture and personal playing calendar of students

Integrate the Gaelic Games Sports Science Framework Workload Principles, and travel time into a training load policy for student members

Contribute to a set of communication principles for college and intercounty managers, and parents that supports student members to play and perform with both

Support a research project to understand the workload demands of student members inclusive of training, travel, part time work, and academic studies

PLAYER CASE STUDIES

CASE 1: SUPPORT FOR ACADEMIC COMMITMENTS

'In final year this year and the workload is huge. I also have a 2-semester project to do, management are very supportive and know that commitment to my studies and project work might mean I miss a training if totally necessary.'

(Male, Football)



CASE 2: PRIORITISING SPORT OVER ACADEMIC RESPONSIBILITY

'With 6 trainings per week and a huge college workload, it is hard to balance the two. With regards to experiences last semester, I have compulsory labs in college. I recall two events last semester where these labs clashed with the O'Connor Cup league matches. Each of these labs require a lab report which is worth a significant percentage of my overall grade for the module. I agreed with my manager that I would play these matches instead of attending the labs. Sports absence notes do not apply for my labs and therefore I will be marked out of a lower percentage for this module.'

(Female, Football)



CASE 3: TRAINING/TRAVEL LOAD CHALLENGES FOR STUDENT MEMBERS

'The only issue I had and have seen other players have in the past is if for example if there is a Sigerson game on Wednesday and intercounty training on Tuesday. Players end up being half in half out of the Tuesday session. I have been told that I would be only doing e.g 15 minutes in a session and then are asked to do more of a session while it's on and at that stage it hard/near impossible to say to a manager that you aren't partaking in the session due to a Sigerson game the next day. Instead of doing 15 minutes, you could end you doing 30/45 minutes the night before a game. I would have also travelled a long distance to those sessions. It would be more beneficial for me to play better on Wednesday to either not attend/not train/have clarity on what I will be doing in the session.'

(Male, Football)



CASE 4: UNSUSTAINABLE WORKLOAD ACROSS COLLEGE AND SPORT

'So I actually stepped away from the panel last week because... I'm on placement, I have loads of placement at the moment with nursing and like it's 13 hour shifts. There's so much going on like, I was working as well and I'd come home for training and I just actually made myself, like I ran myself into the ground because you were waking up at half five to go into the hospital to be on call for 7:00 o'clock. And then you're coming home at, like, 9 o'clock. And you were going straight into bed. It's so challenging, like I'm living with five other first years and like, they're all like party mad. So it's so hard to like. You know, I suppose I was trying to live like two or three lives at once, so I just decided to make the decision to actually step away last week, which is kind of tough as well, because obviously you know how it is. Like you love the girls and stuff, but it just got a bit too much and I actually got very sick from it so I took a step back because it was crazy.'

(Female, Camogie)



CASE 5: MANAGING TRAINING LOAD ACROSS COLLEGE AND COUNTY

'The way we worked it was it there was most lads playing preseason leagues on a Sunday and that so we usually only done like a walk through on a Monday evening, a couple of pucks like there wasn't much to it. Obviously, lads that aren't on intercounty teams do a good bit more training, but for the intercounty lads there would literally just be a couple of pucks that would be it like, there wouldn't be much more, and then it's just to kind of a get together before a match on a Wednesday or Thursday, and then you'd obviously, for me anyway I know, personally, I had to be at Intercounty training on the Tuesday. But if you're playing Wednesday, you weren't expected to tog out. And then if we had training again on the Thursday or Friday, our manager just let it up to myself to see how my body is feeling and if I was able for a small bit of training or if I wasn't able for any, but he kind of let me kind of go with that and see how I felt. So he never really contacted the Fitzgibbon manager, it was just kind of up to myself and he kind of let me off on the day after the college match.'

(Male, Hurling)



CASE 6: EMOTIONAL TOLL

'College is already a humongous pressure no matter the course and then on top of that adding the thoughts of disappointing parents, siblings, team members, my managers, myself is a thought I experience frequently whether it's due to poor academic or poor commitment. I often find one has to suffer for the other to succeed and it's a constant battle.'

(Female, Camogie)



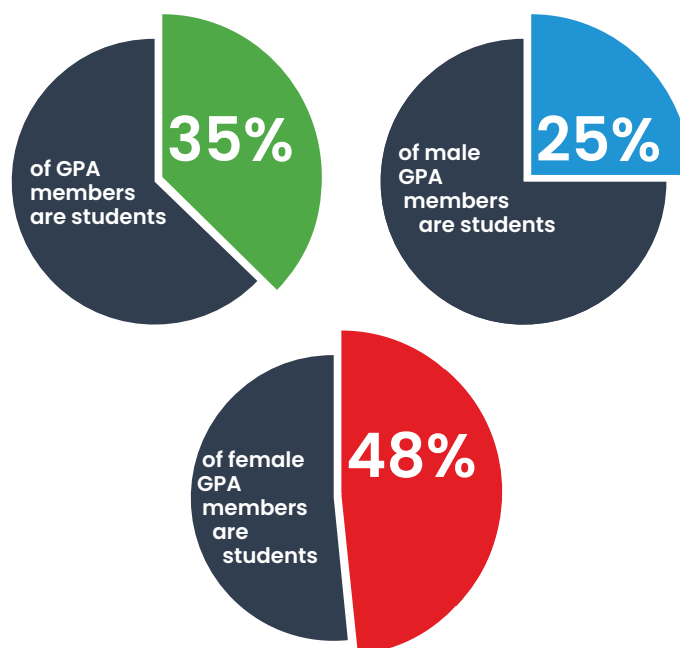
WHAT DID WE DO?

METHODS

The GPA engage with student members annually to understand their experiences on and off the field of play. In late 2023, 967 students engaged with a survey linked to the administration of annual scholarships. Additionally, in February 2024, the GPA, using an independent facilitator, conducted four focus groups with 20 student players.

The purpose of the focus groups was to develop a further understanding of the issues experienced by students in balancing their sporting, academic and personal lives. In order to guide the interview script for the focus groups, a thematic analysis of the open ended survey questions was undertaken. Key survey results were also taken into consideration in the development of these focus group questions.

The four focus groups were conducted on Microsoft teams and the discussions were recorded and transcribed using the platform. A framework analysis method was used to analyse the data.



WHO ARE THE STUDENT MEMBERSHIP?

Students constitute 35% of the GPA membership overall, with a higher proportion of female members who are students (48%), compared to 25% of male players. The average age of the sample was 22.7 years (23.4 for males v 22.1 for females). There were slightly more females in this student sample (53%) compared to

overall GPA member population (35%) and the majority of students were full time and undergraduate. The three most common discipline areas students are engaged in are education, business and science, although healthcare was common for females and engineering for males.

Table 1: Overview of Study Sample

	% (n)	Male % (n)	Female % (n)
Camogie	21.6 (209)		53.3 (515)
Football (Female)	31.6 (306)		
Football (Male)	24.9 (241)	46.7 (452)	
Hurling	21.8 (211)		
Full Time	94.1 (910)	92.5 (418)	95.5 (492)
Part Time	5.9 (57)	7.5 (34)	4.5 (23)
Undergraduate	82.1 (794)	75.9 (343)	87.6 (451)
Postgraduate	16.1 (156)	22.1 (100)	10.9 (56)
PhD	1.8 (17)	2 (9)	8 (1.6)
Education/Teaching	25.5 (247)	23.2 (105)	27.6 (143)
Business/Accounting/Finance	17.7 (171)	26.1 (118)	10.3 (53)
Science	12.9 (125)	8.8 (40)	16.5 (85)
Arts/Humanities/Law/Social Sciences	10.2 (99)	9 (41)	11.1 (58)
Engineering	9.9 (96)	15.7 (71)	4.9 (25)
Healthcare	9.6 (93)	2.9 (13)	15.5 (80)
Sport Related	9.6 (93)	8.4 (38)	10.7 (55)
Technology/Computing	1.3 (13)	9 (2)	0.8 (4)

HOW ARE STUDENT MEMBERS EXPERIENCING COLLEGE?

Almost all respondents (94.7%) were satisfied with their course choice with career prospects and interest in the subject area the most common factors influencing course choice. Career prospects were more influential for males (39.8% v 30.9%) and interest in the area more for females (58.4% v 48.5%).

8.2% of males and 6.8% of females noted flexibility with sport as a factor in their course choice.

For over one third of respondents (35.2%), financial factors such as scholarships, fee reductions, and grants impacted their course choice.

Almost one in five students have had to repeat a college exam (higher for males) and 8% have had to repeat a college year. 9% of first years have repeated a full year. **Almost one third (32.7%) of males frequently miss class due to sporting commitments compared to 22.3% of females.** Sporting commitments are impacting

on academic work for one in five students, a further 60.5% indicate that their work is impacted sometimes. Ultimately for many students (open responses) this means allocating more time to sport than studies, playing catch up academically, being under pressure to complete assessments and failing to attend mandatory classes.

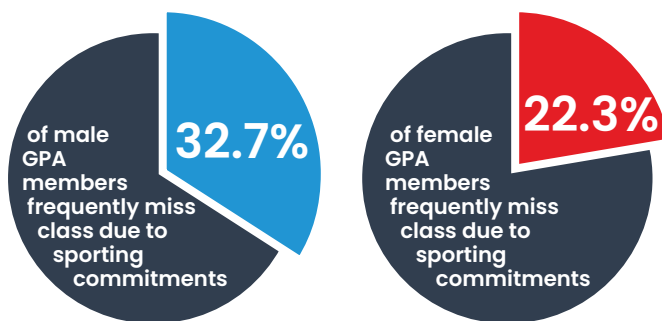


Table 2: Students Engagement with Academic Studies

	Male % (n)	Female % (n)	Total % (n)
Repeat A College Exam	22.8 (37)	14 (72)	18.1 (175)
Repeat A College Year	8.2 (37)	4.1 (21)	6 (58)
Frequently Miss Class Due to Sporting Commitments	32.7 (148)	22.3 (115)	27.2 (263)
Sporting Commitments Effecting Academic Work (% Yes)	23.7 (186)	15.3 (79)	19.2 (186)

In the focus group discussions and open responses, students discussed difficulties in trying to keep up with all their commitments around pressurised times in the season. This was described by one student who stated:

'You're probably training 3, 4, 5 times a week, and then you're in college obviously again 3, 4, 5 times a week, you have assignments. You're gonna be studying for exams and then at the same time, I know me looking to break into a team...like it's kind of hard to kind of prioritise one or the other at times. Kind of just kind of hectic. Busy. Probably hard to keep up at some stages.'

(Male, Football)



For many students, college work "takes the back seat" particularly during the busy periods. One student described this inability to evenly balance both:

'I want to do well in both but achieving high standards in both requires a lot of time. So my time tends to go more towards football as I know there are people counting on me resulting in me leaving my academics to suffer a little. I would like more of a 50-50 balance instead of 70-30.'

(Female, Football)



Those undertaking long distance travel for intercounty training mid-week appeared to be impacted the most as illustrated by one student:

'Like that it's probably just the time away from college, like time you have for assignments, deadlines, kind of exams, everything else. You're probably putting in the guts of 30 hours a week maybe. I know myself traveling and playing, it's probably close to 20, 30 hours, so you're kind of taking that away from your college work and then taking it away from being able to work. So it's probably just kind of one or the other nearly sometimes you kind of have to nearly sacrifice maybe some exams, maybe not studying as well as you might have been able to do if you weren't kinda as busy with the other one.'

(Male, Football)





The end of the college year was outlined as one of the most challenging times in the academic calendar due to final deadlines and exams coinciding with the end of the league and start of championship. The pressure of fitting exams and training into their day was captured by one student:

'Even for me, I found I had three sit down exams in one week this year. So kinda... I've been stressing out during the day, getting exams finished and then going to training. Obviously, it's going to take a toll on you in training, you're probably not as well prepared as if you didn't have it but thankfully I got through it, but probably didn't prepare as well for others as I did in some.'

(Male, Football)



The pressures of placement were also described as stressful in terms of travelling logistics, financial pressures, as well as the general added stress associated with placement. This balancing act of being on placement and keeping on top of their sport was described as hectic by one student:

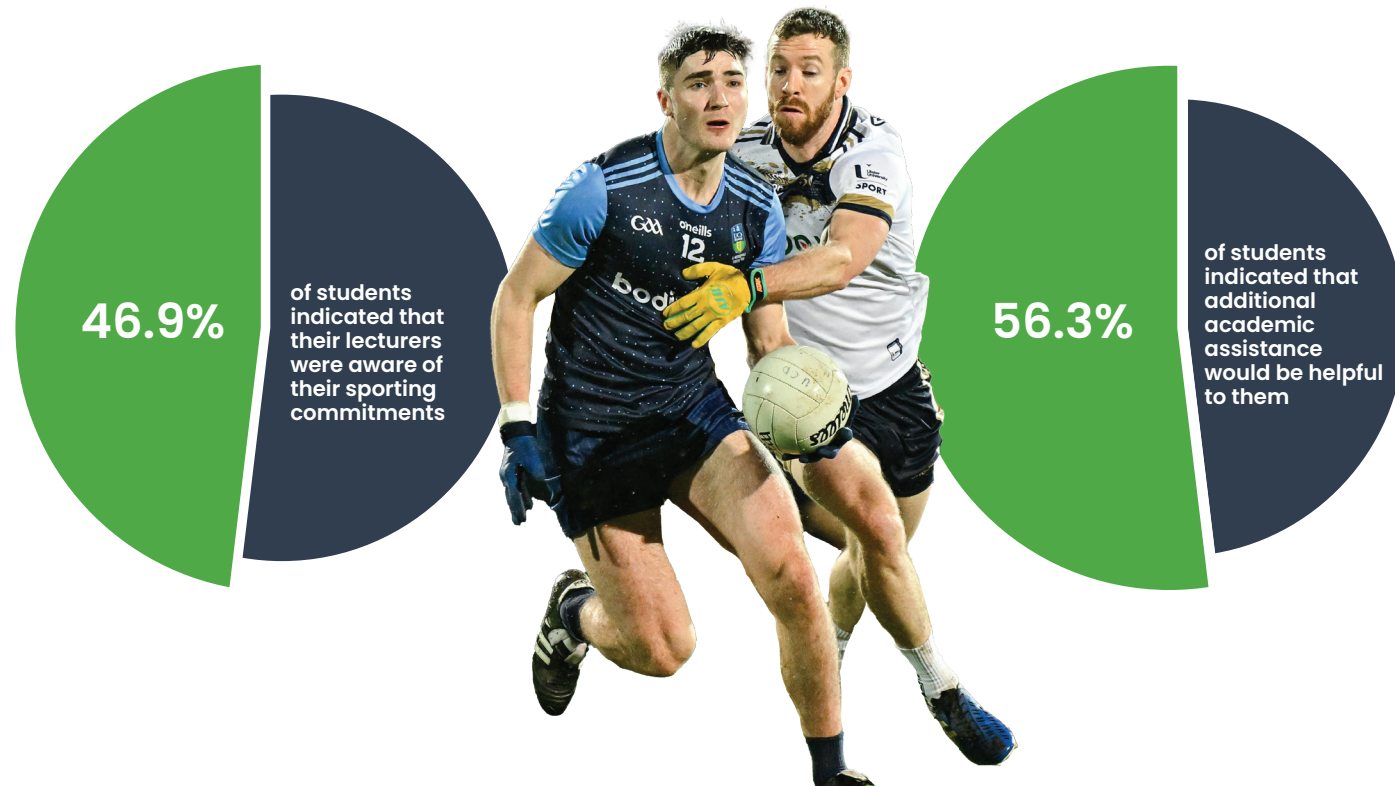
'I'm on placement now and I'm in final year and it's just like, just crazy. Like you're getting up at all hours of the morning trying to get to your school in Dublin and then when you get home, you're just planning for the next day and then you obviously have a training session with either the college, or you try and get a gym session in. And just like even trying to eat properly, plan and then you're trying to plan the next day, get all your resources done and just it's just hectic.'

(Female, Football)



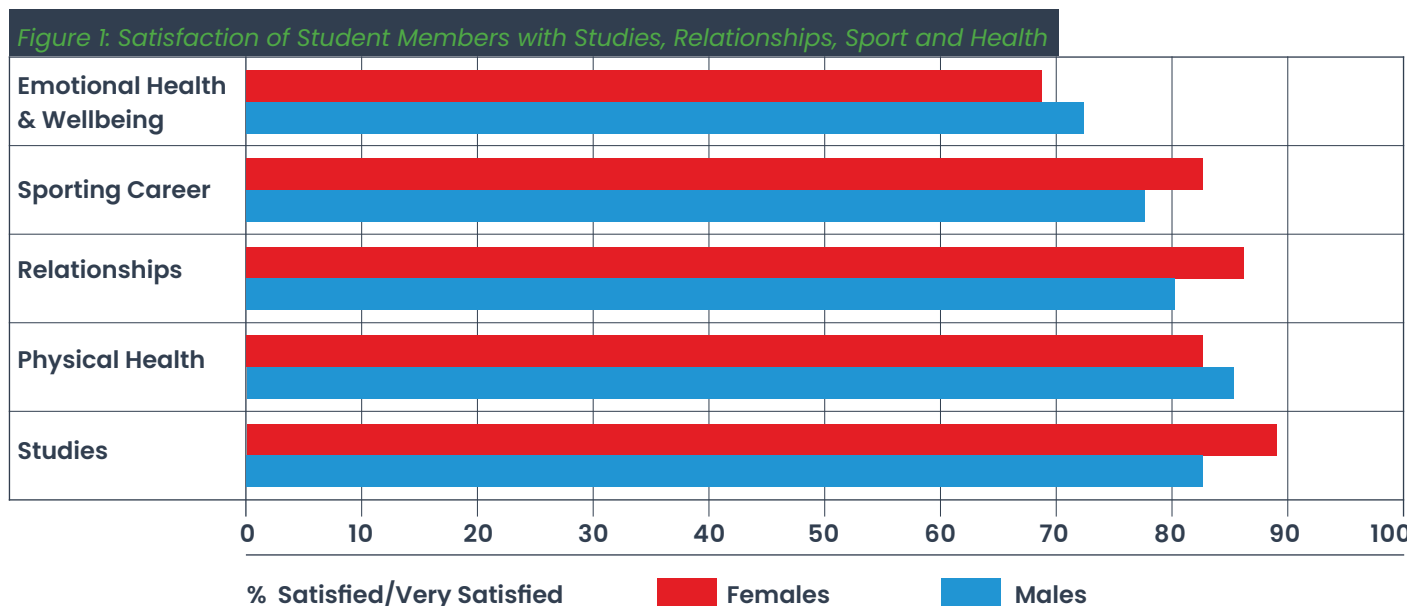
Approximately half (50.5% males and 54.7% females) seek support when they are having trouble with their course. The majority sourced help from their college (57.9%) and family/friends (24.2%). Across the whole

sample, there appear to be opportunities to provide additional academic support to student members, particularly given that:



In general, **85.5% of students are satisfied with their studies, 83.2% with their physical health, 82.6% with their relationships, 79.7% with their sporting career and 70% with their emotional wellbeing.** Of note in qualitative

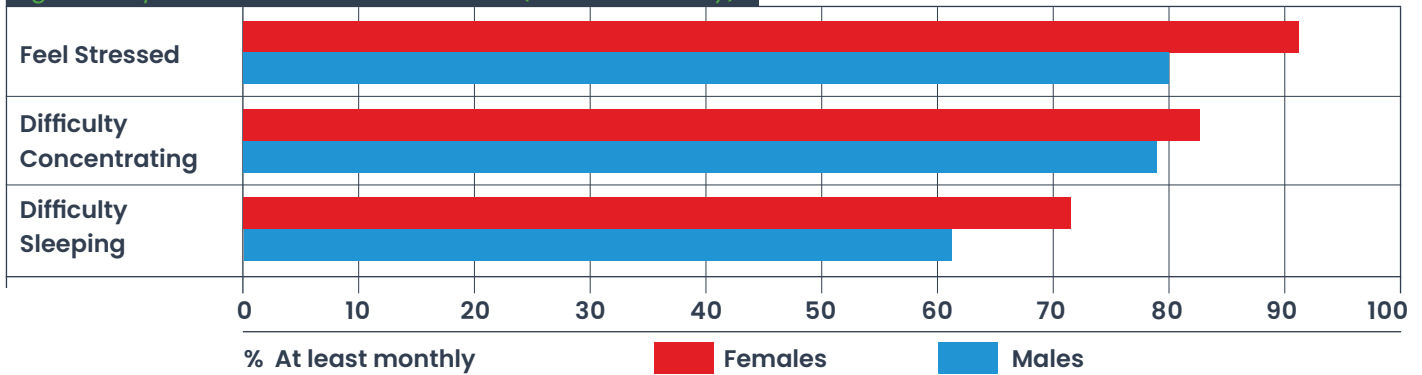
feedback and focus groups was that students feel they don't have enough time to maintain friendships and have a social outlet due to their workload.



Almost **three quarters of all student members feel stressed (86.8%),** have difficulty concentrating (80.7%) and have difficulty sleeping (68.5%) at least monthly. **Females typically experience these symptoms**

more frequently than males. Feelings of stress were prominent across open responses, appearing explicitly in almost 100 separate student statements.

Figure 2: Experiences of Student Members (At Least Monthly)



56.9% of all student members are working part time, notably higher for females (64.5% v 48.2%). 8.4% of males are working full time compared to 4.9% of females.

68.2% of full time female and 53.6% of male students are working. Recent statistics (HEA, 2023) indicate that 57% of full-time students are working during term time. Male players are below this average working rate, females above.

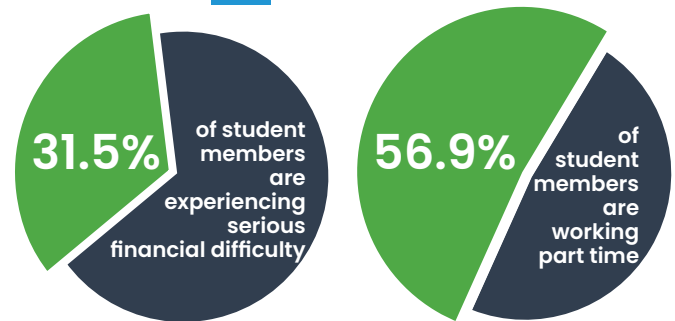
61.1% of respondents do not have time for a part time job yet 42.7% of this group are working. This anomaly was captured by one student, and reflected by many others in open responses:

'It is extremely difficult in this current time as well as financially difficult to support myself with the current economy etc. I work part time one day a week and even one day a week is extremely difficult to uphold as I have so much college work to do as well as so much training but I have to do the one day a week in work or else I won't be able to support myself in the slightest.'
(Male, Football)

84.4% of the respondents have had to turn down jobs due to sporting commitments, 81.6% report that this has had a financial impact on them and their family.

31.5% of student members (35.2% males v 28.3% females) are experiencing serious financial difficulty and 61.4% are experiencing some financial difficulty (58.6% males v 63.9% females). The latest Eurostudent survey (HEA, 2023) indicates 33% of students are experiencing serious financial difficulty.

In the focus group discussions, the majority of the students reported working full time or part time jobs. Those who were working admitted that they had a flexible boss, were working for a relative or had a job that fit in around their schedule (e.g. day off college) as factors in being able to maintain the job they were in. Not being able to find a job that would fit into the intercounty schedule, not having enough time and not being able to hold down a part time job in the past were all reasons given for those not working. Many of those who were working described it as tough, but also necessary to be able to fund food, accommodation, fuel and travel costs. The need to work was described by one student who stated:



'I live about an hour away from [my college]....The student finance like the maintenance loan that you get didn't cover my rent at all, so I was really struggling... I had to, like, borrow money off [my parents] all the time. But like then pay it back over the summer when you did have more time to work... So it's just for the diesel basically that I need the money for and... like the diesel is quite expensive at the minute. So like, it's hard to sometimes to get the money in my car or the fuel in my car. But thankfully it [part time job] helps a lot. I need it [part time job] so I do, otherwise I wouldn't be able to travel up and down.'
(Female, Camogie)

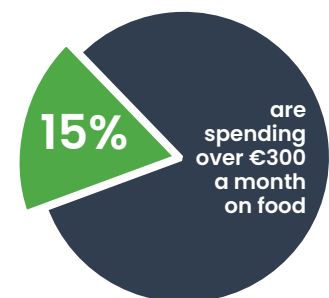
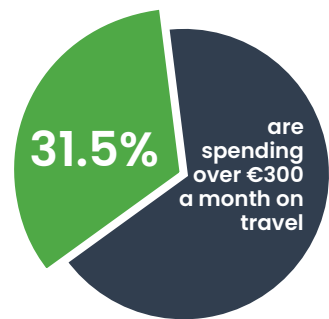
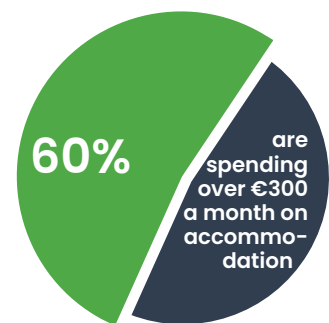
The chaotic nature of trying to fit a part time job into their week was illustrated with an example by one student:

'We played [a game] one day at home, which is probably only a puck of the ball away from where I worked. And I was supposed to start the shift at 4 o'clock. I think the game was at 2. I said to the manager I'll probably be a bit late, but sure I'll be in straight after. There was a lot of [opposition] supporters still drinking in the pub as soon as they finished the game. So like it's just a bit chaotic sometimes going between working and games and then obviously getting up in the morning, probably going to class again like so it did get a bit chaotic I suppose.'
(Male, Hurling)

Major expenditure for students is on accommodation, food and travel with most other costs for communications, health, childcare, and loans at less than €100 per month. Males have a higher expenditure on travel and food than females. While direct comparisons are challenging, GPA student members are spending more on travel than the general student population (the Eurostudent Survey 2022 indicates the average monthly expenditure for students on travel is €114).

Table 3: Monthly Expenditure for Student Members

		Accommodation % (n)	Food % (n)	Travel % (n)	Socialising % (n)
0-100		31.4 (304)	25 (242)	15.7 (152)	66.6 (644)
100-300		8.9 (86)	60.3 (583)	51.1 (494)	30.5 (295)
300-500		23.6 (228)	12.6 (122)	26.4 (255)	2.2 (21)
500+		36.1 (349)	2.1 (20)	6.8 (66)	0.7 (7)
>300	Males	56.7 (256)	19.9 (90)	40 (140)	-
	Females	62.3 (321)	10.1 (52)	27.1 (181)	-



The costs associated with travelling home for training and matches, financial pressures at home, borrowing money from parents as well as the increasing cost of accommodation were all issues discussed. Many students are experiencing financial difficulties and this burden was reflected on by one student:

'I am extremely dedicated to giving my highest performance both academically and within my sporting commitments. However, within this current economical crisis and financial struggles, I am struggling to meet basic needs. Financial assistance would help to lessen the burden and strain of financial worry and would help me to further propel myself into my sports and academics without underlying worry.'

(Male, Hurling)



These financial pressures were exacerbated by the majority of female players not receiving any reimbursement for travel costs. One student who had to give up her job for the duration of her college placement discussed the financial impact it had on her and her family:

'So the accommodation is so expensive in [my college] and it's just kind of crept up the last few years like it's just such a sum of money gone every month like and obviously like it's all just savings that it's coming from like. But like the grants we do get are great but like just only cover nearly one month and like, say in our house now there was three of us say in third level education or whatever. So like, it's just a lot of financial pressure in say, the one household. So it's just it's tough.'

(Female, Football)



HOW DO STUDENT MEMBERS EXPERIENCE SPORT IN COLLEGE?

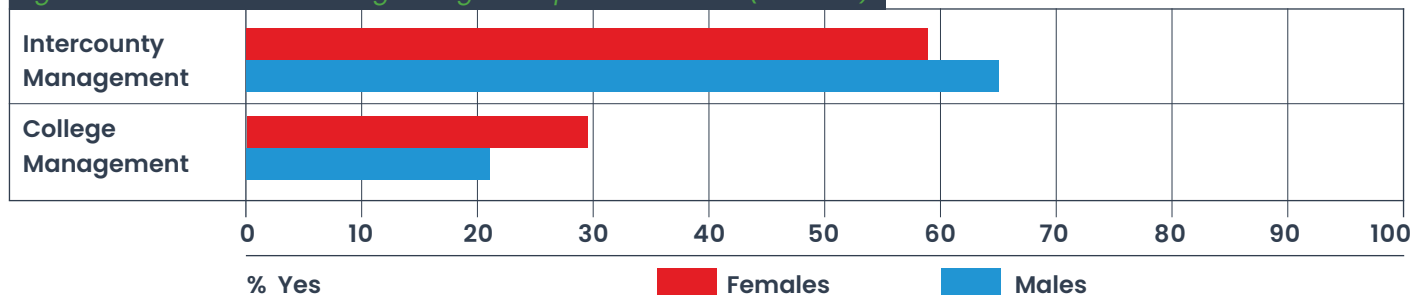
More females (76.5%) than males (65.9%) across the GPA student membership currently play for their college team.

Among those who are playing, 37.4% are experiencing some or a lot of pressure to play with their college team.

Among those on a college scholarship, 77.4% feel under a lot/a little pressure to play because of this scholarship.

During the main college sporting season (Jan/Feb), intercounty managers are the main source of pressure for students to play sport.

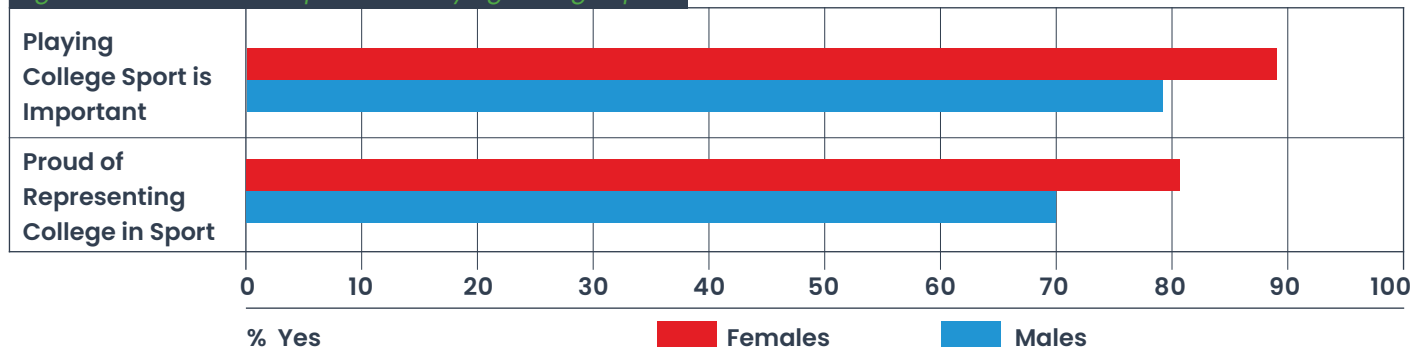
Figure 3: Main Pressures During College Competition Season (Jan-Feb)



84.2% of students feel playing college sport is important to them and subsequently the majority (82.8%) of this group are actively playing with their college team. 76.5% ascribe this importance to being proud to represent their college in sport. Other reasons for valuing college

sport are the social aspect (16.9%) and the pathway it presents to intercounty representation (5.3%). The latter was approximately five times higher for male respondents (10% v 1.6%).

Figure 4: Students Perceptions of Playing College Sport



This was also reflected in the focus groups where the majority of participants were keen to play for both their college and county. Students cited high standards, playing with other high calibre intercounty players and making friends for life as factors in wanting to play with the college. This desire to play was described by one student:

'It probably is the standard. I got to play freshers and we won the Fresher League and Championship, so we had a savage team that first year when I came into the college anyway. So I just fell for it then and I just kept playing. You'd want to play every year like...I wouldn't say nah, I'm not playing just because I'm with [the county]...I'd want to play that and try manage both of them at the same time.'

(Male, Hurling)



Overall, **53.2% of student members feel their intercounty manager is very supportive of their involvement in their college team.** (50.4% males v 55.5% females) and 49.9% feel their intercounty manager **always** provides them with flexibility to balance college and county playing commitments (52.9% male v 47.4% female). There is a relationship between level of manager support and flexibility, and subsequent current involvement in college teams.





Table 4: Relationship Between Intercounty Manager Support and Playing College Sport

	Playing with College Team % (n)	Not Playing with College Team % (n)
Flexibility of IC Manager		
Very Supportive	74.3 (382)	25.7 (132)
Somewhat Supportive	68.6 (282)*	31.4 (129)
Not Supportive	66.7 (28)	33.3 (14)
Flexibility of IC Manager		
Always	71.6 (346)	28.4 (137)
Sometimes	72.6 (329)	27.4 (124)
Never	54.8 (692)	45.2 (275)

*This relationship was more notable for male student members



There were some examples reported in the focus groups where the intercounty manager and college manager communicated well, particularly around managing player load. A positive experience was illustrated by one student:

'The way we worked it was there was most lads, especially January in February, lads playing preseason leagues on a Sunday and that so we usually only done like a walk through on a Monday like Monday evening, a couple of pucks like there wasn't much to it. Obviously, lads that aren't on intercounty teams do a good bit more training, but for the intercounty lads there would literally just be a couple of pucks that would be it like, there wouldn't be much more, and then it's just to kind of a get together before a match on a Wednesday or Thursday, and then you'd obviously, for me anyway I know, personally, I had to be at Intercounty training on the Tuesday. But if you're playing Wednesday, you weren't expected to tog out. And then if we had training again on the Thursday or Friday, our manager just let it up to myself to see how my body is feeling and if I was able for a small bit of training or if I wasn't able for any, but he kind of let me kind of go with that and see how I felt. So he never really contacted the Fitzgibbon manager, it was just kind of up to myself and he kind of let me off on the day after the college match.'

(Male, Hurling)



Students were satisfied with not being in situations this past year of playing an intercounty and college game less than 72 hours apart. However, intercounty training the night before college championship games, when not managed correctly posed some issues as described by a student with long distance travel:

'The only issue I had and have seen other players have in the past is if for example if there is a Sigerson game on Wednesday and intercounty training on Tuesday. Players end up being half in half out of the Tuesday session. I have been told that I would be only doing e.g 15 minutes in a session and then are asked to do more of a session while it's on and at that stage it hard/near impossible to say to a manager that you aren't partaking in the session due to a Sigerson game the next day. Instead of doing 15 minutes, you could end u doing 30/45 minutes the night before a game. I would have also travelled a long distance to those sessions. It would be more beneficial for me to play better on Wednesday to either not attend/not train/have clarity on what I will be doing in the session.'

(Male, Football)



On some occasions, communication between managers appeared to be left to chance, determined by whether the managers had a good relationship or knew each other. Students frequently cited little to no communication between managers and reported the county GPS system used as the main method of

communication. Students were happier when the managers communicated and did not leave the student “stuck in the middle ground” as reflected by one student:

‘Last season, I was often caught in the middle of interactions between college and inter-county management after being told they would contact each other directly. This often had me feeling overwhelmed as I was happy to do both in order to avoid any confrontation.’

(Female, Football)



There were also examples of poor support from intercounty managers in relation to college sporting commitments.

‘I feel extremely stressed and burnt out as my inter-county manager refuses to accommodate for college football. We are made to train 5 times a week without a night off as our inter-county manager does not respect our college team commitments.’

(Female, Football)



Finally, one quarter of student members (25.9%) felt there was no communication between their sports team and academic departments about their sporting commitments. **Communication that was in place was rated adequate or poor by 58.5% of respondents.**

In the focus group discussions, there were mixed views on how students felt supported by their academic departments at college. Students felt supported when they were prompted by their GAA/sports department to reach out for help if they needed. Some have availed of support through online lectures and extensions. In one University, extra tuition was offered to students who were away for matches. The extra support was welcomed, and this was captured by one student who stated:

“It probably sounds bad in a way like to get the week [assignment extension], but the hours you’re putting into your sport and everything else, you don’t have the time or as much time as maybe other people to do assignments to study and things. So it is nice to have that little bit of support when you do need it.”

(Male Football)



Missing labs and mandatory lectures for college games and intercounty training was described throughout the focus group discussions as one of the greatest challenges for students. Often students could not be accommodated by their university department to switch into other class times, and some felt there needed to be more leniency to support them in their college sporting endeavours. It was felt that a greater understanding and link between the academic department and management was needed as reflected on by one student:

“I think say just for a college balance alone, I think there should be more of a link between say, the management setup within a sporting group and your college crowd like your college lecturers and stuff. I think there should be more of a link there because like I think for an understanding from your lecturers to understand that the commitment, you’re giving outside of your course to something that the college wants you being part of. And then I think it’s also beneficial for the management to understand maybe the demands of your course and what’s being required.....but it could be just a way of lightning the load or taking a bit of pressure if they new what you were actually going through.”

(Female, Football)



WHAT IS THE LOAD AND IMPACT OF SPORTING COMMITMENTS AMONG STUDENT MEMBERS?

Student members train on average four times per week across club, college and intercounty with almost three trips home for training for males and closer to two for females.

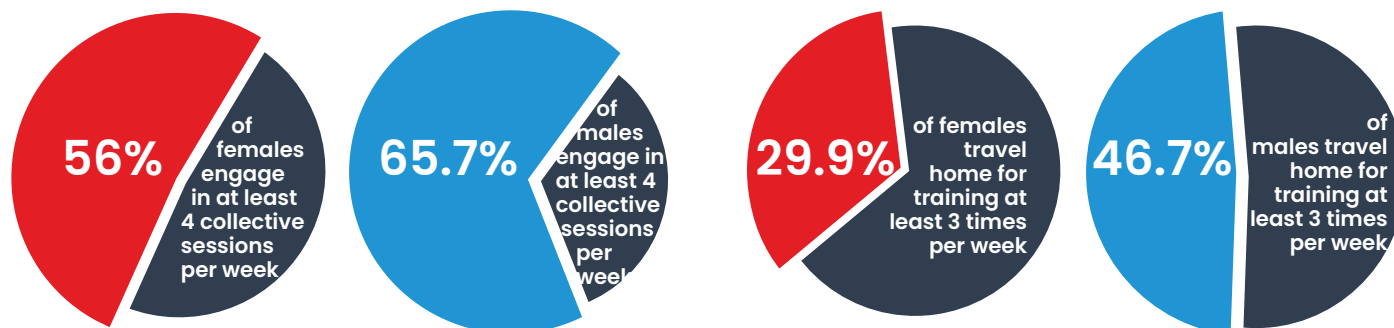


Table 5: Training Load for Student Members

	Total Collective Sessions Per Week (Mean)	Numbers of Journeys Home Per Week for Training (Mean)
Males	3.9	2.7
Females	3.8	2.1
Total	3.8	2.4

Focus groups highlighted the impact of travel on student's physical and mental health. For those travelling long distances, the physical toll it took on their bodies as well as the logistics of organising their college day around inter county training was discussed. The amount of time taken for travel not only impacts the day itself, but also leads to fatigue for the following day's activities. The long car journeys, late nights and physical impact was reflected on by one student:

'I just found last year I really struggled with the long car journey. I constantly just had reoccurring hamstring injuries just from the mere fact that you'd be rushing, rushing to try and leave Dublin at a certain time in the day. Then you're making it down, just about making it down when probably the girls could be nearly warming up like some evenings. And then you're trying to get a decent warm up and then you're obviously doing a really hard session or whatever and then you're sitting in a car then for three odd hours back up to Dublin, getting up really late, like I remember last year, I think we could be getting up at like 1 o'clock back up to Dublin like it was crazy hours.'

(Female, Football)

This level of sporting engagement is impacting on student members. Over half do not feel it is easy to manage all of their commitments (sporting, academic, family), and in particular, a large proportion of females (71.5%) agree that they are regularly overwhelmed by all of their commitments. One student captured the challenge involved in balancing all of their commitments:

'This is challenging as you don't want to let your team down and not be at every training but you also don't want to let yourself down as you always want to go your best academically.'

(Female, Camogie).

In the open-ended responses, feeling 'overwhelmed' was regularly reported by students due to trying to balance each area of their lives in order to succeed as well as financially support themselves. This was captured by one student who stated:

'I felt last year I was falling behind in college work because of training, all I focused on was training and when it wasn't going well that would effect my mental health which would then fall back on my studies, sometimes I felt like I didn't have control in any aspect of my life.'

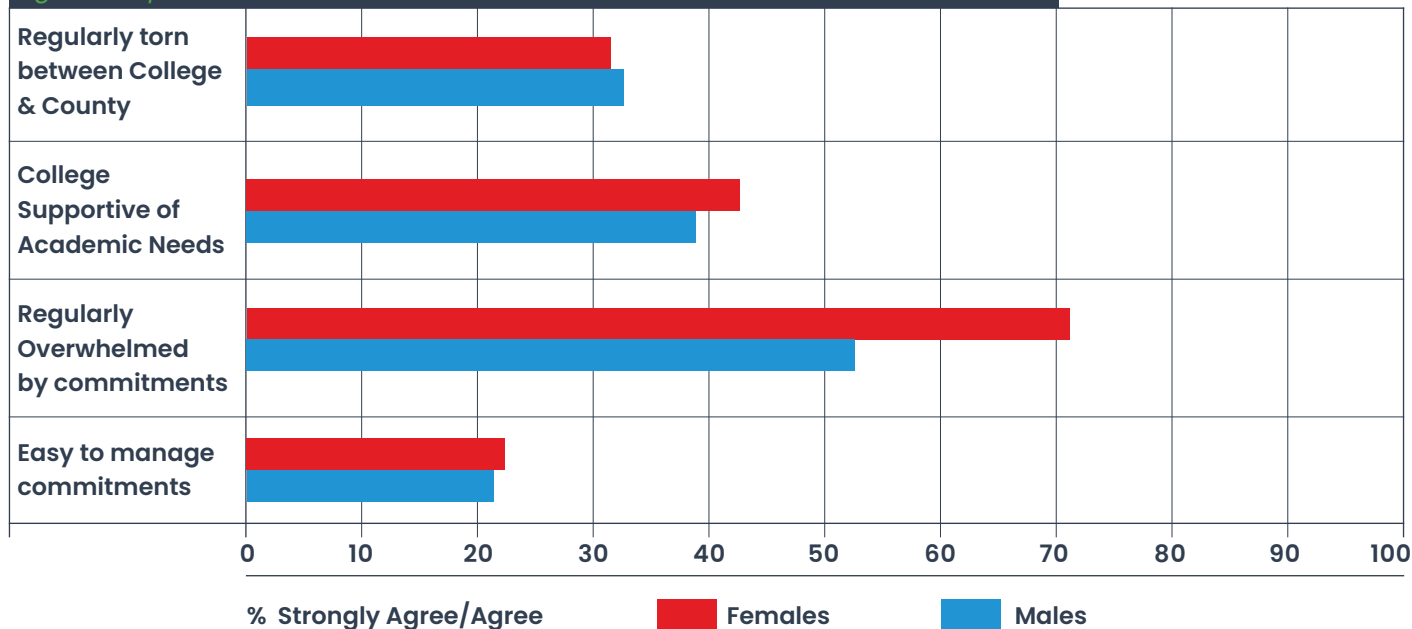
(Female, Football)

Approximately one third of respondents agree that they are regularly torn between playing college and intercounty, and the different needs/expectations around performance for both at one point in a season.





Figure 5: Experiences of Student Members



93%
had less than two weeks break between club and county seasons



There is no consensus among student members around when college competitions should be played and completed. 46.8% opt for before Christmas and 51.7% after Christmas, with little variation between male and female players. In the overall player survey, 92% of student members said time should be ringfenced for college competitions in the overall fixtures calendar. Equally, while 88% of student members are in favour of the split season model, half would be in favour of reduced training load and **93% had less than two weeks break between club and county seasons.**

In addition, in open survey responses and in focus groups participants repeatedly mentioned the lack of break for the student intercounty player due to the new “split season” structure, and this was viewed as an ongoing issue in the overall fixtures calendar.

‘Due to week in week out dedication to both my academic studies and sporting commitments with club and county, I feel there is little gap for recovery and wind down time. As my club reached the Ulster club stages of the championship for the past two years and having played county, I have had no let-up in training or playing in the past 2 years, something I feel is resulting in burnout mentally and physically.’
(Male, Football).

Female students described the pressures they felt to go directly from their county into club once the intercounty season finished up. This is followed by an overlap between club and college as well as college and county.

This pressure was illustrated by one student who stated:



“And I also I think like the minute county stops in July, like your club is waiting for you to come back and there’s just absolutely no like break even to go on holidays or anything. And if you do go on holidays, then you’re club is mad at ya. And it’s just so annoying... you just want a break, but you also don’t wanna like let any team down. So it’s just so it’s hard to fit a break somewhere in there which we all kind of need I think after a long year.”

(Female, Football)



Due to these overlaps in seasons, not having a specific “pre-season” was outlined as a concern for some students for their prehab and gym work. One player described the physical impact she felt this had on her:

“I’d say as well we don’t really get a chance, college students anyways. If you’re playing like whatever up to July, you’re going straight into club and then you’re going back to college again, you don’t really get time for like a proper preseason. Like say, actual solid work done in the gym. Because I feel like that’s huge for injury prevention then going into the following season and I actually kind of struggled with that last year, I really struggled with just like injuries just like reoccurring and like looking back on it was just because I actually had no time to get proper solid foundations done in the gym that were actually beneficial because you’re constantly playing games so you’re constantly managing what you’re doing in the gym and then you’re going out onto a pitch. So I just found that hard as well, to.... actually rest like just a few weeks off and then actually getting like decent preseason done in the gym before you are into the following season.”

(Football, Female)



As in the survey data, among the focus groups, there was no consensus on the overall season structures. However, male players did describe their satisfaction with the timing of the current colleges competitions as long as its overlap with the pre-season league was managed in the correct way. The influence of the intercounty manager appeared to be a key factor in how players could balance both as captured by one student:

“If you had the likes of [male hurler] there who his manager obviously is happy enough for him to go off playing and contacts the [college] manager then he is grand but [other male hurler] got it a bit more tight with only going off the GPS data so I’d say it’s a bit of everything so if you’re taking into consideration the load the lads are going through and if the manager would only lend themselves a wee bit then then it would all be rosy...”

(Male, Hurling)



HAS THE STUDENT MEMBER EXPERIENCE CHANGED OVER TIME?

The experience of male GPA student members has been reported previously in 2015 and 2019. Over time, male students have improved their academic performance and reduced training and travel commitments yet remain overwhelmed and stressed by their commitments.

Table 6: Changes in Student Experiences

Key Findings	2015	2019	2023		% Change (Male Only)
			M	F	
% repeating an exam	40	35	23	14	-12
% repeating a college year	14	11	8	4	-3
% not finding it easy to manage all of their commitments	58	62	54	56	-8
% feeling overwhelmed by their commitments	50	54	54	72	0
% stressed at least once per month	54	78	81	92	+3
% collective training at least four times per week	89	81	66	56	-15
% travelling from college to training at least three times per week	52	69	47	30	-22



HOW WELL DO STUDENT MEMBERS ENGAGE WITH THE GPA?

57.2% have heard of GPA Beo360

BEO360

25.7% have engaged with GPA Beo360

37.8% have attended a GPA Rookie Camp

39.6% would like more support with nutrition

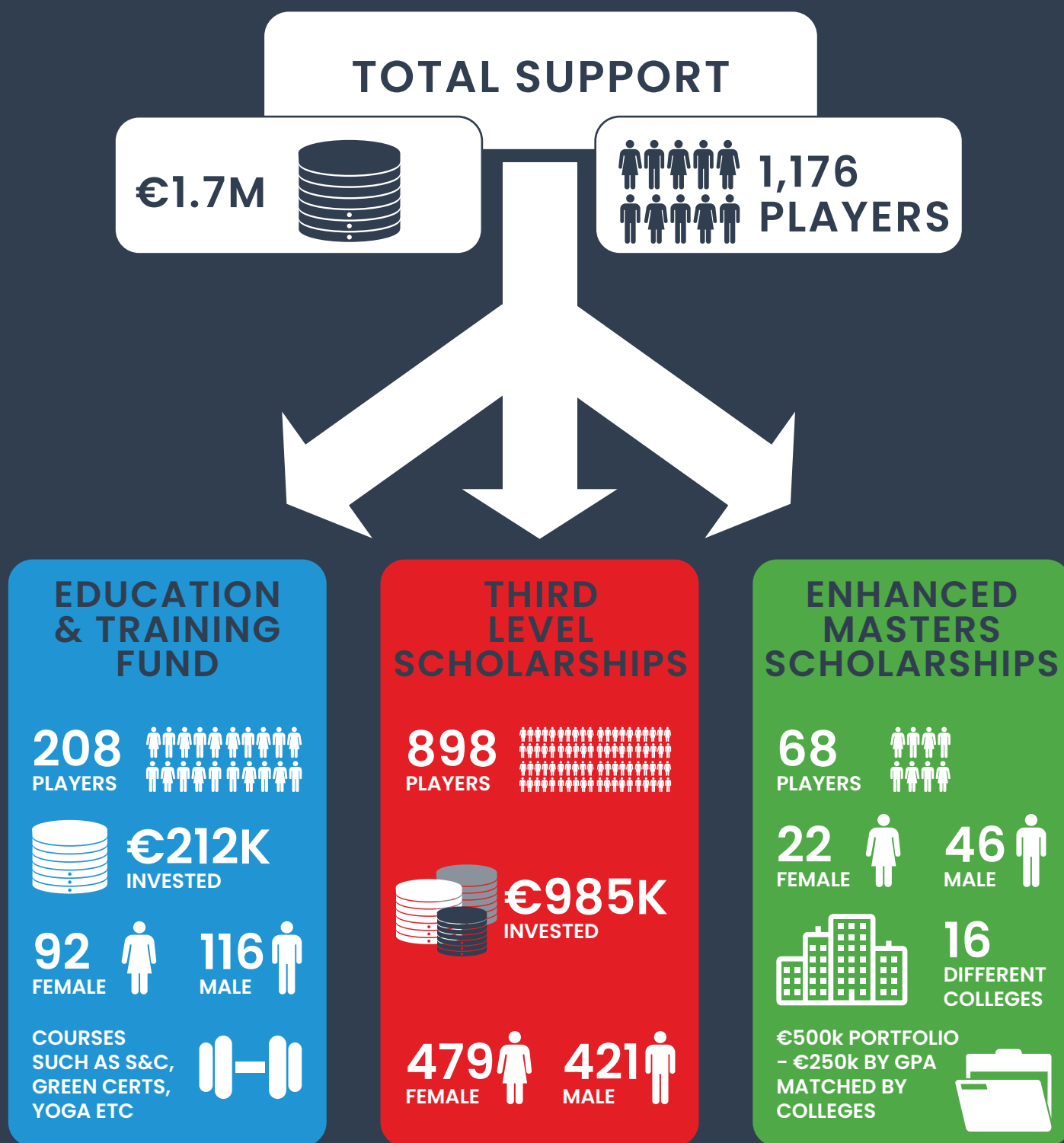
22.2% would like more support with financial wellbeing information

20.1% would like more support with strength & conditioning*

16.3% would like more support with career guidance

Differences were apparent between females (more S+C) and males (more financial wellbeing).

GPA EDUCATION SUPPORTS 2023



WHAT'S CHANGED SINCE 2019?

A REVIEW OF THE KEY RECOMMENDATIONS MADE IN THE LAST GPA STUDENT REPORT IN 2019

WELLBEING

RECOMMENDATION	STATUS	COMMENTARY
1 Further Mental Health Research on Student Inter-county Players	Ongoing	Annual scholarship survey. GPA supported PhD on 'Exploring the Challenges and Experiences of Elite GAA Student Athletes at 3rd Level Education' (Conor Whelan - PhD Researcher & Galway Hurler).
2 Mental Health First Aid Training for GPA Staff	Achieved	Completed with GPA staff in January 2020. To be delivered on a more regular basis to ensure staff are continuously equipped. Movember AOTG (Youth Mental Health) programme launched in 2023 and 21 player programme facilitators (GPA Members) completed mental health first aid training.
3 Gambling Awareness	Achieved	Specialised gambling counselling support. GPA Staff completed problem gambling awareness training in 2019. Players sharing lived experiences at player events & in the media. 'Person Behind The Player' addiction awareness programme available for squads.
4 Mental Health Literacy Workshops for Inter-county Teams	Ongoing	To be reviewed within overall suite of GPA supports and services, programme development and roll out informed by PhD research project.
5 Growth of the GPA Rookie Camp	Achieved	370 members attended in person in 2023 at 4 locations, with workshops including financial management, social media & journalling and resilience.
6 Grow Promotion of & Engagement in GPA's Player Development Programme	Achieved	Rebrand of GPA Player Development Programme - BEO360 launched in 2021. Expanded suite of supports for players including career advice, CV & interview prep. 1,026 x BEO360 Coaching sessions delivered to players in 2023. Number of GPA student bursaries grew from 478 in 2019/20 to 898 in 2023/24; an 88% increase reflecting the membership growth as a result of integration with the WGPA. 68 Enhanced MSc scholarships awarded in 2023/24, across 16 different colleges.
7 Enhanced Manager Engagement	Achieved	Engagement officer calls to individual managers, group calls for managers, ongoing information giving on GPA services and supports.



ACADEMIC

RECOMMENDATION	STATUS	COMMENTARY
8 Representation on GAA's Higher Education Committee	Partially Achieved	Attendance at GAA HEC AGM, ongoing communication, strong relationship developed. Aim to establish similar engagement with LGFA & Camogie Third-Level committees.
9 Engagement with Athlete Friendly University Programme	Ongoing	To be reviewed, priority to standardise player supports nationally for all members.
10 Enhanced Player Academic Supports	Achieved	Services available, as part of BEO360, to help students with career & educational guidance, financial reimbursement via Education & Training Fund for grinds / tutoring / upskilling and access to an online learning platform, LinkedIn Learning, to upskill in specific topic areas.
11 Targeted Education on Dual Career to Tackle Athletic Identity Issues	Achieved	Delivered through the BEO360 Player Development Programmes, additional promotion of GPA Education & Training fund, support for retraining & further education, Spotlight profiling used to promote self-awareness.
12 Engagement with College Games Development Officers	Partially Achieved	Ongoing relationship building, plan for structured engagement from 2024 onwards.



FINANCIAL

RECOMMENDATION	STATUS	COMMENTARY
13 GPA Internship/ Graduate Programmes	Outstanding	To be reviewed, existing best practice to be considered.
14 Student Concessions	Partially Achieved	Discounts available through the GPA member app. Target to grow partnerships on nutrition offerings and meal deals.
15 Review of Squad Charter	Achieved	Enhanced male player charter agreed in 2021 including additional support for student members, due for review again in 2024. A female charter has been established in 2024.
16 Financial Literacy Module	Achieved	Developed and ready for roll out in 2024.

WELFARE

RECOMMENDATION	STATUS	COMMENTARY
17 Present to the GAA's CCCC Annually on Inter-County students	Outstanding	To be reviewed, 2024 report to be shared.
18 Representation on Fixtures Review	Partially Achieved	Clearly defined window for third-level competitions to best reduce overlap and manage player load.
19 Develop Player Eligibility Protocols	Ongoing	GPA to engage with student members on eligibility proposal.
20 GPA Research on Training Load	Ongoing	New research proposal on training load to be actioned in 2024.
21 Minimum Standards of Care Policy	Partially Achieved	The GPA engaged with the Gaelic Games Sports Science Working Group to develop the Sports Science Framework, which provides guidance for supporting student members.
22 Best Practice Recovery Education	Achieved	Recovery packs supplied to members, education focused on recovery provided at Rookie camps.
23 Removal of Colleges from Pre-Season Competitions	Achieved	Colleges withdrew from Inter-county pre-season competitions in 2020.
24 Player Welfare Conference	Achieved	Balance Conference was delivered in 2019 and 2020. GPA have engaged with subsequent GAA/LGFA/CA welfare events.
25 Road Safety Partnership with RSA	Achieved	Multi-year campaign promoting safe driving, using key players and GPA events to amplify message.



MANAGING TIME

RECOMMENDATION	STATUS	COMMENTARY
26 Player Comms & Negotiation Training	Achieved	Communication training available within Player Development Programme, support for player reps with negotiations training.
27 Time Management Supports/ Interventions	Achieved	BEO360 Coaching to assist players with Life Skills such as time-management, self-awareness and adaptability. PDM's are accredited Spotlight Profile practitioners, Spotlight is a psychometric testing tool for understanding behaviour style and mindset.



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