

Report on the Survey on the proposed 'New Schools' Restructure

November 15, 2023

1 Introduction

This survey has been designed by the University of Sheffield branch of the University and College Union (UCU). Its purpose is to measure staff response to the announcement of the 'New Schools' Restructure Proposal announced by the Vice Chancellor and University Executive Board (UEB) on 18 October, 2023. Under this proposal, the 46 existing 'academic units' within four faculties would be combined into 23 Schools. The scale of the proposed change to the structure of the university is substantial, leading to a situation in which all five of the University faculties could be undergoing change management simultaneously.¹

The University Council will be asked by UEB to vote on the proposed plan on 14 December, following a recommendation by the University Senate provided on the previous day.

2 Executive summary of results

- This survey was taken by 971 people—more than 10% of the staff at the university—with a good mixture of job roles and a fair mixture of campus union members and non-union members. They were mostly well informed about the proposals.
- The majority of respondents were unconfident that the proposals would bring about positive change for the university, and larger majorities were unconfident that the proposals would bring about positive change for their workplace or for them personally. In each case, very small minorities expressed confidence.
- Although a small minority of respondents expressed confidence that the proposals would reduce workload in general, almost no respondents expressed confidence that it would decrease their own workload.
- Both a majority of academics and of PS staff were unconfident that the proposals would improve consistency, or that they would engender new collaborations.

¹The Faculty of Health has recently completed Phase 1 of a restructure into Schools which is similar to that in the current proposal, and which will continue concurrently with the beginning of the 'New Schools' proposal.

- A heavy majority of respondents felt that the timeframe was too brief, and expressed little faith in senior management’s ability to consult and adapt the proposals accordingly.
- There was a wide range of free-text comments, with common themes including criticism of the proposals, criticism of the process, criticism of the handling of other recent restructures, and a lack of confidence in the University’s senior management.

3 Survey Design

There were four questions gathering demographic information, related to respondents’ job type, work area, union membership and attendance at UEB briefings on the subject. No personal identifiable data was requested.

These were followed by eleven substantive questions: nine using a five-point Likert scale, one on a three-point scale, and one option to provide additional information as a free-text comment. These questions elicited respondents’ views across several areas, including level of confidence in the restructure proposal, workload implications, collaboration opportunities, student experience, and the process and timeline of decision making on the restructure proposal.

4 Demographics of Survey Respondents

The survey had 971 respondents. Of these, 461 (47.5%) reported having an academic role, 237 (24.4%) reported working in professional services in a department, school, or faculty, 145 (14.9%) work in central professional services, and 85 (8.8%) are in technical or support roles. The remaining 43 (4.4%) respondents either preferred not to identify their role or provided another answer.

A majority of participants (78.1%) are based within faculties, which likely reflects the relative distribution of staff in the university, but may be slightly more skewed in this direction. The breakdown of work areas is provided below in Table 1, including all but 16 (1.6%) respondents who preferred not to indicate their work area.

		Faculty			Central	Other
FAH	FS	FSS	FH	FE		
90	136	259	82	192	137	59
9.3%	14%	26.7%	8.4%	19.8%	14.1%	6.1%

Table 1: Breakdown of survey respondents by area of university

Respondents were more likely than not to be members of a trade union, with 471 (48.5%) indicating they were members of UCU, 102 (10.5%) indicating that they were members of UNISON, and 73 (7.5%) indicating they were members of Unite. 282 (29%) respondents are not a member of any trade union, and 41 (4.2%) preferred not to indicate. A small number of respondents (<15) indicated membership in a trade union that was not one of the above three, or current non-membership but an intention to join UCU, Unite, or UNISON imminently.²

²As it is possible to be a member of multiple trade unions, this question permitted respondents to choose all options which applied.

The skew towards union membership in respondents is perhaps unsurprising, since the survey was conducted by UCU and, due to lack of access to all-staff mailing lists, advertised mostly through union activism. We welcome the considerable number of non-unionised respondents, and would be happy to work with HR on a survey that would reach the entire staff body.

A substantial majority of respondents (827, 85.2%) had attended or viewed the briefing by the Vice-Chancellor and other UEB and HR colleagues on the restructure proposal. This indicates a level of engagement with the proposal among participants.

5 Reactions to the restructure proposal

An analysis of the 10 substantive questions measured quantitatively are presented in four groupings, consisting of levels of confidence in the restructure proposal (questions 5-7), predicted impacts on workload (questions 9-10), predicted impacts on collaborations and consistency in delivery (questions 8 and 11), and reactions to the consultation process and timeline (questions 12-14).

Of the 971 respondents, 413 provided free text comments (question 15). A small subset of comments which illustrate themes in the quantitative results are included in subsections 5.1-5.4, and an analysis of the overall free text comments appears in subsection 5.5.

5.1 Level of confidence

Questions 5-7 asked respondents to state how confident they were that the proposed restructure would bring about overall positive change for the university as a whole, their specific work area, and them personally. Participants answered on a 5-point Likert scale with 1 indicating 'very unconfident' and 5 indicating 'very confident'.

Responses to all three questions in this section show a marked lack of confidence in the restructure proposal. For question 5, "How confident are you that the proposed restructure would bring about positive change for the university as a whole?", fully 66.3% of respondents chose 1 or 2, and only 7.6% of respondents indicating confidence in the proposals by choosing 4 or 5 (Figure 1).

In free-text comments, some respondents identified previous experience with restructures here at the University of Sheffield and elsewhere as a reason for their lack of confidence (1), as well concerns about its potential to increase layers of management in the university structure (2).

- (1) All the evidence we have from Sheffield and other universities, is that amalgamation of departments results in reduced job satisfaction for individuals, a remote leadership, higher staff-turnover, reduced feelings of belonging and satisfaction from students. While assurances are given for the short-term in terms of programmes and jobs, experience elsewhere suggests that in the medium-term, programmes and jobs become under threat.

- (2) Each time we are consulted about the running of the university we ask for less top-down rigid management, and now we get this proposed destruction of departmental structures.

5. How confident are you that the proposed restructure would bring about **overall positive change** for the **university** as a whole?

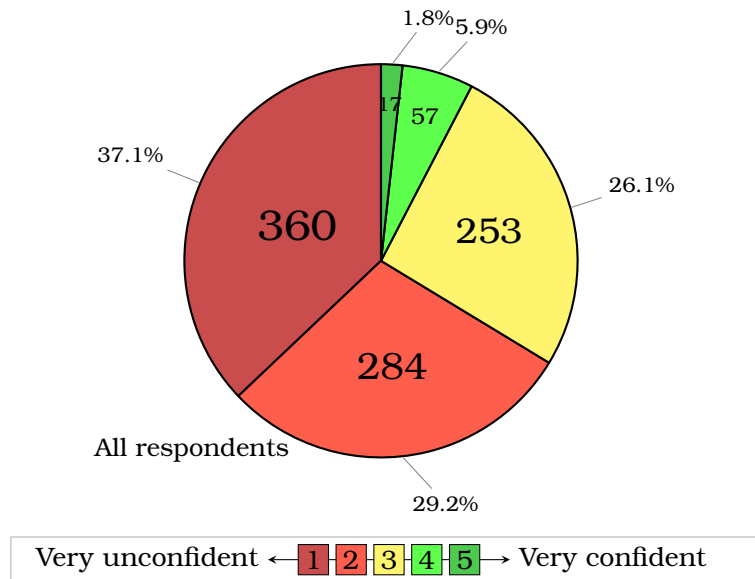


Figure 1: Responses to question 5

A similar overall pattern occurs in question 6 (Figure 2) and question 7 (Figure 3), although responses are skewed even more negatively. On question 7 for example, 69.6% of respondents indicate a lack of confidence by choosing 1 or 2, and only 6.3% chose 4 or 5.

A comparison of union members (Figure 3b) and non-union members (Figure 3c) on question 7 reveals that for both groups, a majority of respondents actively doubt that the restructure proposal will bring about positive change for them personally. Levels of no confidence are higher among union members, at 75.7% as compared to non-union members at 56.6%. A comparable pattern of responses is seen for questions 5 and 6, with a majority of respondents expressing a lack of confidence in the restructure proposals irrespective of union membership, and a similar difference in levels of response between the two groups.

We have also compared the responses of staff in academic roles to those of staff in professional services roles. On question 7, responses suggest that academic staff are less confident in the proposed restructure, with 69.6% indicating a lack of confidence that the proposed restructure would positive impact their jobs (Figure 3d) compared to 61.5% of professional services respondents (Figure 1e). We were interested in whether this subdivision indicated a more general difference of opinion between academic and professional services staff, or whether work area might be an additional predictive factor. We therefore further subdivided PS staff, and found that those who work in departments, schools, and faculties (who may be in scope of the proposed restructure) are less confident in the restructure (71.7% choosing 1 and 2) than both academic staff and their PS colleagues in central services. This pattern suggests a high degree of uncertainty and lack of confidence by those who are most likely to be directly impacted by the restructure (3).

Importantly, the majority of responses in every single respondent subgrouping indicated a lack of confidence in the restructure proposal.

6. How confident are you that the proposed restructure would bring about **overall positive change** for **your specific area** of work within the University?

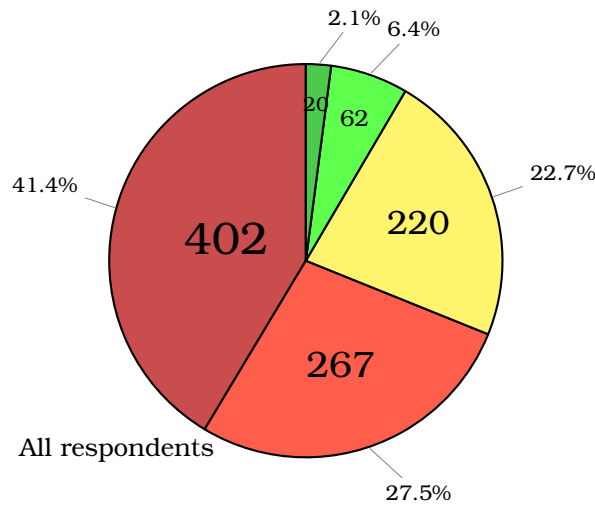


Figure 2: Responses to question 6

- (3) As a PS member of staff, I am fed up with constantly being at risk of a restructure wherever I go. We are severely undervalued in the work that we do and viewed by senior management as disposable, if it will save them a bit of money.

5.2 Workload

Questions 9 and 10 referred to workload, asking respondents how confident they are that the proposed restructure would lead to an overall reduction in workload and in their own personal workload. Responses to these two questions were overwhelmingly negative, with virtually no difference between academic and professional services staff. Once again, both union members and non-union members responded substantively negatively, indicating that they are not confident that workloads will reduce a result of the restructure. The difference in scale between union and non-union members was also smaller than in the previous section, with 84.5% of unionised respondents, and 73.8% of non-union respondents reporting a lack of confidence that the proposal would reduce their personal workload.

Although a small number of respondents (10.7%) responded indicating some positive view of workload reduction across the university, there were virtually no positive responses to question 10 (2.2%), suggesting that even those who believe workload might decrease for someone else do not believe it will happen for them.

The response pattern here is particularly concerning, because one of the stated aims of the restructure is to reduce workload, in response to serious and longstanding problems with high workloads at the University of Sheffield. This suggests that staff overwhelmingly do not have faith that one of the stated aims of the restructure will be achieved (4).

7. How confident are you that the proposed restructure would bring about **positive change** for **you and your role** at the University?

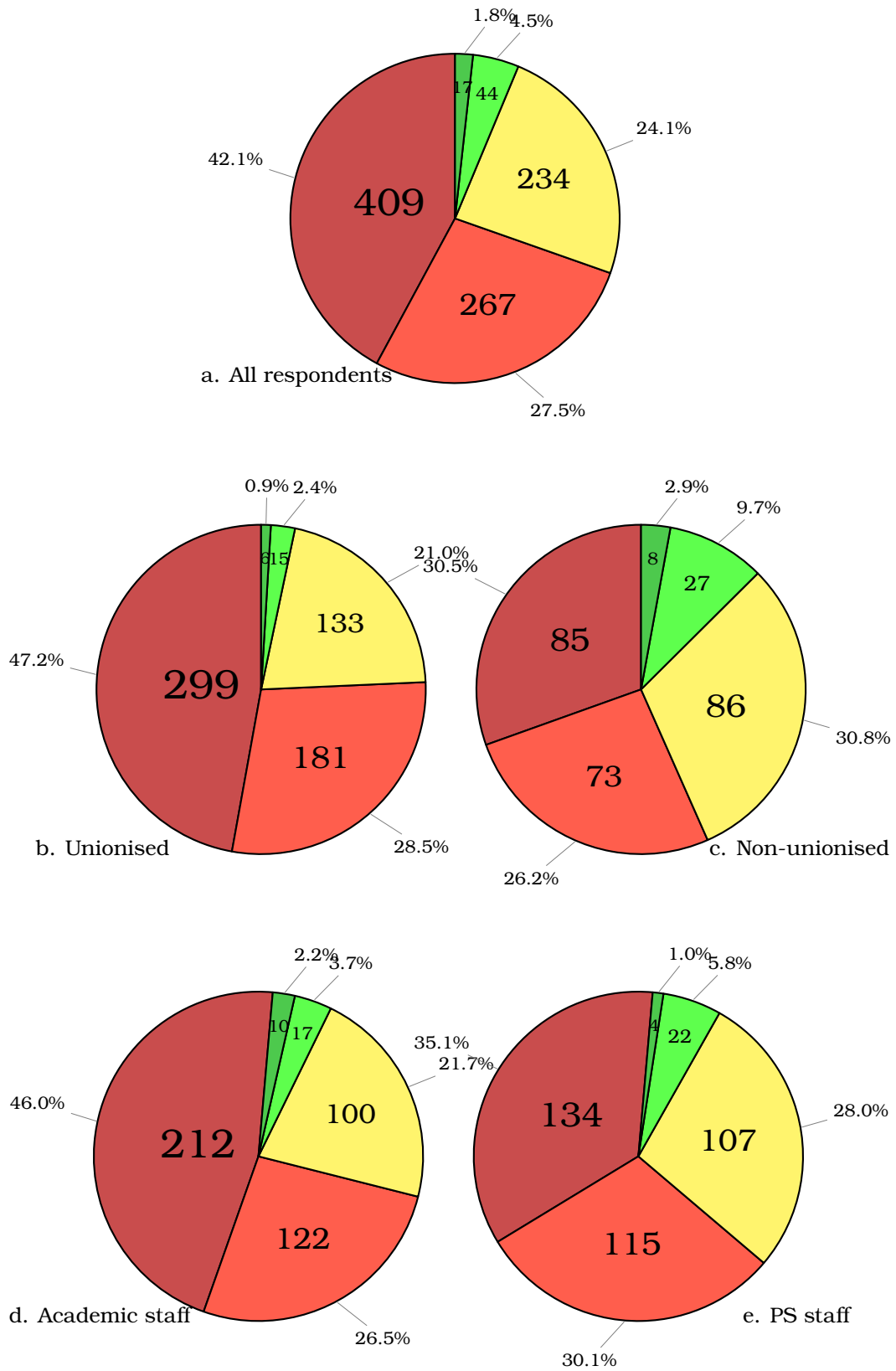


Figure 3: Responses to question 7

- (4) "My understanding is that the intention is to reduce workload. The initial roles that will be lost are HoDs/DAMs and PAs (although v.little mention of the PA in comms on the restructure). No intention to have 'Deputy' role. The HOD role is a v.busy role currently (reluctant to fill the post/people leaving before end) How will doubling this work load be beneficial to them or the staff/students they are responsible for? This first step in the structure does not lead to confidence the idea is not cost cutting or that workloads are a driving factor. A further driver, is for resources to be better managed, to provide equal staffing and to give equal provision to students. In my faculty, two v.large depts are being merged. How does bigger equal better.

9. How confident are you that the proposed restructure would result in an overall **reduction of staff workload** across the **University**?

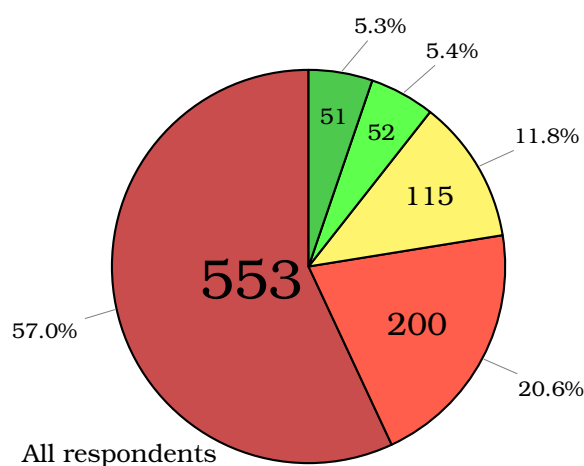


Figure 4: Responses to question 9

5.3 Collaborations and consistency

Question 8 referred to collaboration ("How confident are you that the proposed restructure would bring about new collaborations between existing academic departments, including in terms of research, research funding, and teaching?").

This was among the questions with the greatest variation of opinion by demographic among respondents, with 59.1% negative overall, but 52.1% negative among PS staff (still a noteworthy negative result, given that merging departmental PS teams into school PS teams might naively be expected to be collaborative in nature).

Question 11 was about the consistency of experience ("How confident are you that the proposed restructure would result in greater consistency in the experience of staff and students at individual Schools across the University?"). Again, 56.8% of respondents answered this negatively (59.9% of academic staff and 53.2% of PS staff), indicating that PS staff are more likely to see consistency in merging teams but, in large numbers, still do not in fact see it. Some respondents raised questions about whether consistency of student experience was inherently desirable (5) or whether it was possible to achieve without sacrificing disciplinary expertise.

10. How confident are you that the proposed restructure would result in a **reduction** of your **personal workload**?

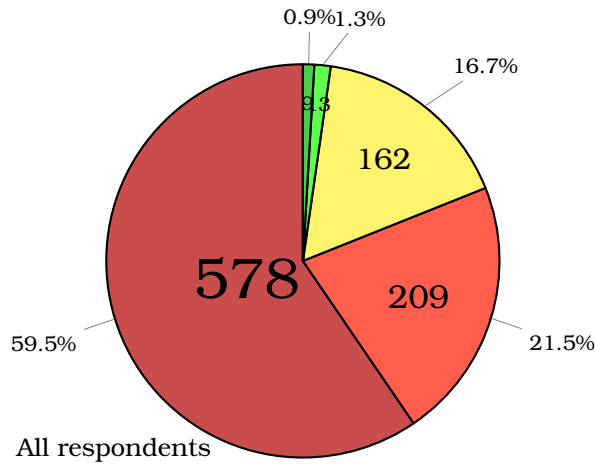


Figure 5: Responses to question 10

- (5) This is going to cause a huge amount of work for colleagues as well as huge uncertainty. I'm not confident at all that they pay off will be worth it and I'm not convinced that 'consistency of student experience' is needed or wanted.

5.4 Process and timeline

Questions 12 and 13 pertained to the process of consultation leading up to any final decision, and question 14 asked about the timeline of this process.

The results were strikingly negative: in question 12 ("How confident are you that the restructure proposals will be subject to robust consultation with staff and students?"), 88.3% responded negatively (1 or 2 on the Likert scale); and only 4.2% positively (4 or 5). This can be broken down to 92.7% negative among union staff, and only 79.9% negative among non-unionised staff.

- (6) It feels rushed. It feels like it could have lots of potentially damaging unknown and un-thought-out consequences. I got more information about it from reading an article in 'The Sheffield Tribune' than I did from attending the all-staff briefing with the VC/UEB, which is rather dismaying.
- (7) I have worked in another local university and been through this process several times before, but this is my first experience of a restructure at Sheffield. In my previous employment staff were encouraged to shape the structure of the changes, with a specific "change process project team" who you could approach and who provided regular updates. Although it wasn't perfect, it meant that the changes were more welcome as they had been shaped by members of staff and not just decided by a Senior leadership board.

8. How confident are you that the proposed restructure would bring about **new collaborations** between existing academic departments, including in terms of research, research funding, and teaching?

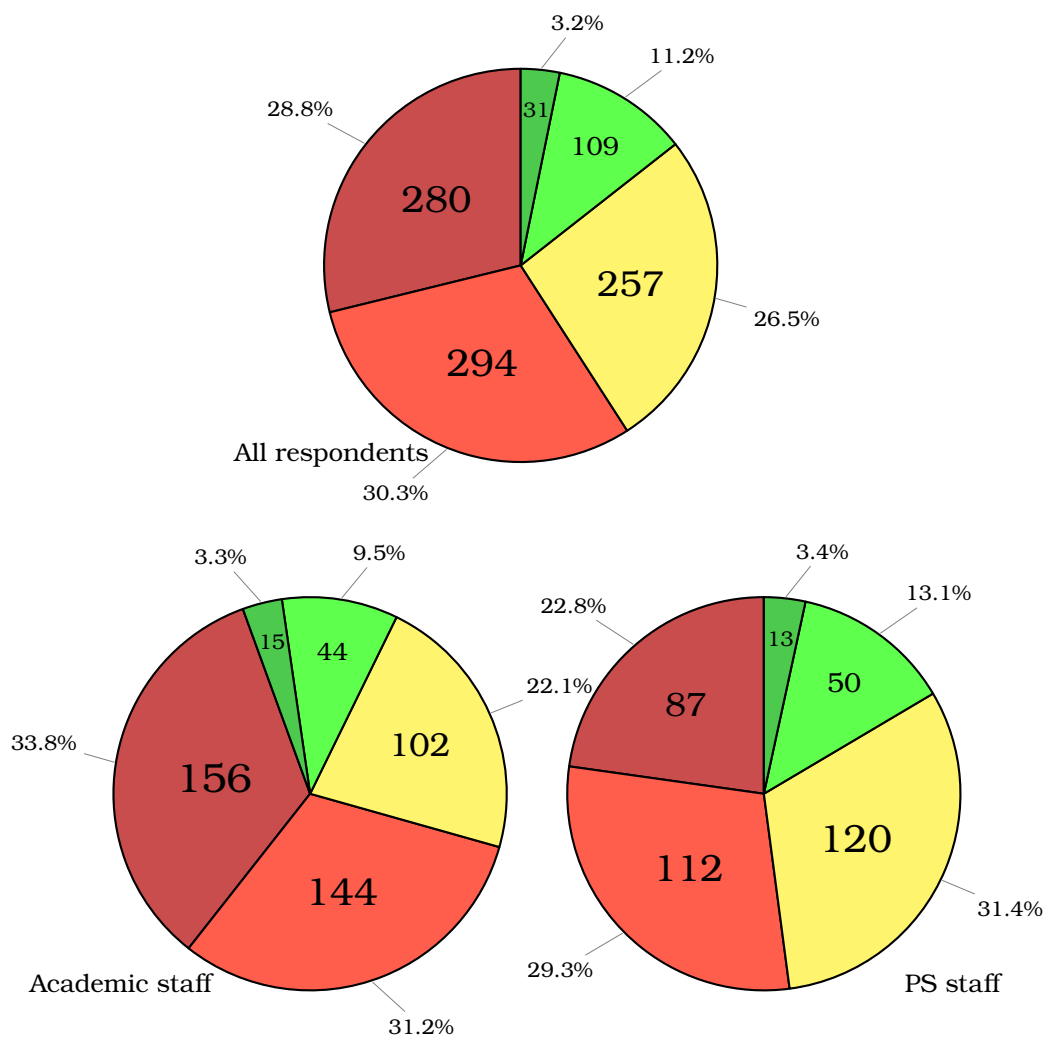


Figure 6: Responses to question 8

11. How confident are you that the proposed restructure would result in **greater consistency** in the experience of staff and students at individual Schools across the University?

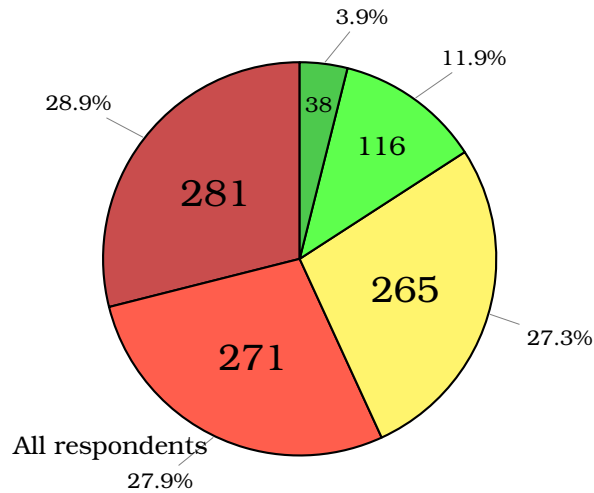


Figure 7: Responses to question 11

More damning yet is the response to question 13 (“How confident are you that the University’s senior leadership will substantively amend the existing proposals on the basis of staff feedback?”), where 88.4% responded negatively (93.2% among unionised staff and 80.7% among non-unionised staff).

Among both these questions there was striking homogeneity in the responses by job type: central PS staff, departmental PS staff and academic staff had very similar percentages.

- (8) I’m not in UCU, and don’t want to be, but the decision to drive this restructure through quickly after the position that UEB took on MAB deductions is truly breath-taking. What’s most offensive is the faux nature of the consultation with staff. If selected departmental managers have already been contacted about the disappearance of their role, the consultation is a sham.

Question 14 referred to the timescale, asking in essence whether decisions should be made faster than suggested, in roughly the timeframe suggested, or slower than suggested. There was the option of “don’t know”, and also the option (“other”) of a more nuanced free-text answer. 81.2% of respondents thought the timeframe was too rapid, with about the same proportion selecting “about right” (7.6%) as “don’t know” (7.0%) and just 0.9% going for “too slow”. Among the 3.3% who chose “other”, the free-text answers were for the most part consistent with a belief that the process is likely to be so critically deficient that it would be meaningless or at least distracting to ask about the timeframe (9):

- (9) a. [the timeframe is] probably about right given that there will be little real consultation
 b. they’re making a decision less than 24 hours after they receive the feedback, so they’re obviously not going to read it
 c. the restructure should not happen

- d. I have no idea how they can finalise anything when they can't describe what it will look like
- e. With no information on what will happen, it's impossible to say if this is too fast or slow
- f. If the UEB provided us with concrete reasons for thinking the plan will achieve their goals (and not generic claims about improved efficiency and experience), then we would have time to evaluate that proposal. But without any information, we simply cannot make judgments by that date

12. How confident are you that the restructure proposals will be subject to **robust consultation** with staff and students?

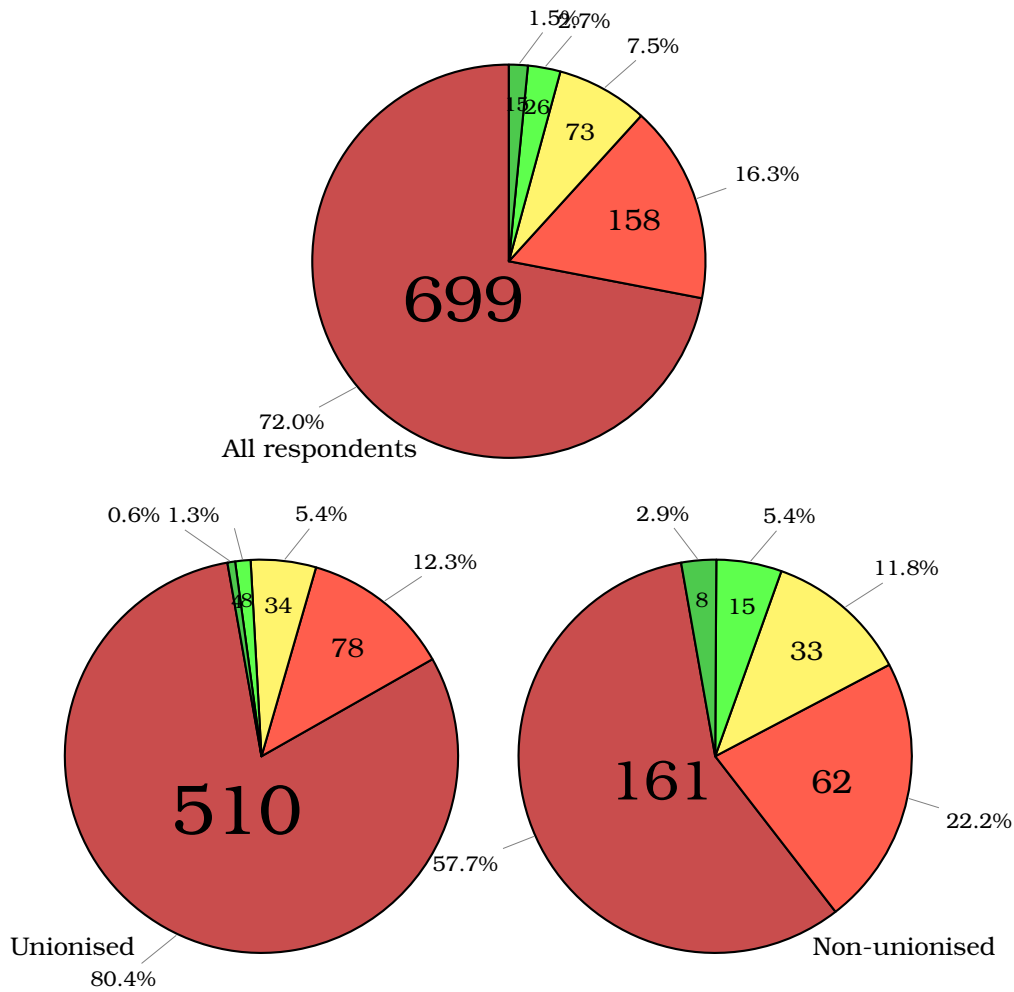


Figure 8: Responses to question 12

13. How confident are you that the University's **senior leadership will substantially amend the existing proposals** on the basis of staff feedback?

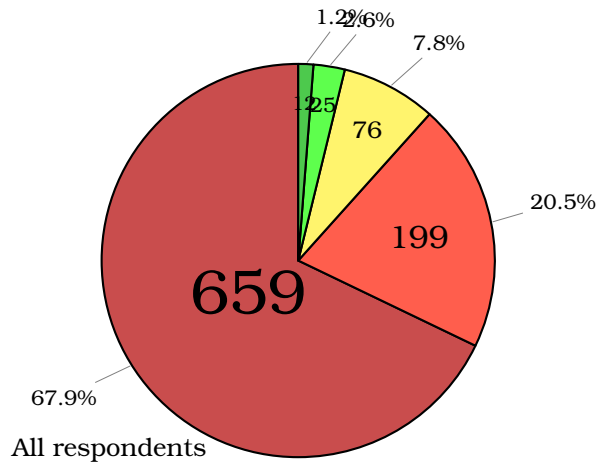


Figure 9: Responses to question 13

14. UEB is proposing to complete the process of finalising and approving restructure plans by December 2023, to be implemented in the 2024/25 and 2025/26 academic years. Which of the following best represents your opinion about the **timescale for feedback on and approval** of the restructure?

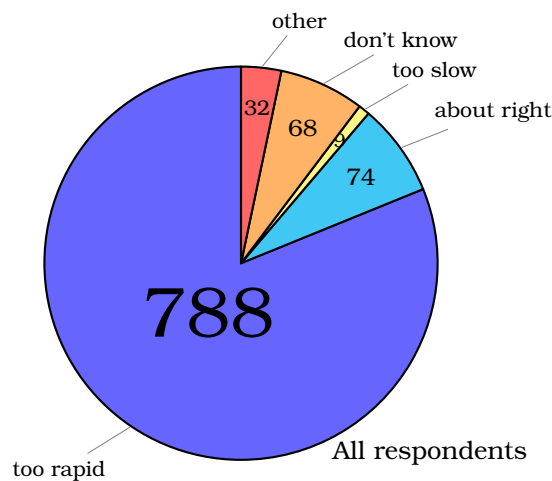


Figure 10: Responses to question 14

5.5 Free Text responses

413 respondents entered a free text comment; however 3 of these consisted of either “N/A” or “no comment” and were excluded from further analysis. This left 410 comments. These comments were examined for the overall response to the restructure (positive, negative, mixed), and broad themes including but not limited to impact on staff or students.

Membership of a union was not a predictor of likelihood to comment, and out of respondents in the three categories (member of one or more unions, not currently a member, prefer not to say) approximately 40% provided a free text comment.

Of the 410 comments, only 8 (2.0%) were unambiguously positive, citing opportunities offered by the restructure proposal. An additional 28 (6.8%) were mixed. These comments largely referenced some potential for gain in certain parts of the proposal, but criticised the speed, scale, lack of consultation, or a combination of those three (10).

- (10) I can see some genuine benefits for my department but instances such as this should be pursued at a local level so that there is time and capacity to implement them properly. UEB’s refusal to follow university policy and procedure is genuinely frightening. They should take heed from the Covid inquiry as to the implications of being arrogant enough to believe that they cannot be accountable before irreversible damage is done to the lives and wellbeing of thousands of staff and students.

The remaining 376 comments (91.2%) were unambiguously negative. The striking imbalance and the consistency in negative response is sobering and bears serious reflection. Membership in a union was not a predictor of the tone of the response, and positive, negative, and mixed comments were provided in roughly equal measure by unionised and non-unionised respondents.

We identified four major themes in comments, which will be discussed below: concerns about this specific restructure proposal; comparison to other restructures at Sheffield and elsewhere; the process of the restructure including scale, timeline, and consultation; and a general lack of confidence in the university and its leadership.

5.6 Concerns about the restructure proposal

The most common major grouping within the comments included some form of specific concern regarding the conception of the restructure proposal itself, and appeared in 206 comments. This includes 72 which cited “vagueness” or “a lack of rationale” of some form (11)

- (11) I do not yet understand the rationale behind this move - so far I have attended Koen’s talk, a Faculty Town Hall and a Departmental meeting with the Faculty VC. I have also looked at the Google site. The only thing that keeps being bandied about is that our competitors are doing this so we must - from what I understand this type of restructure has not been beneficial in most of our competitors. I am also concerned of things that I have heard about how life is now in Biosciences and also the School of Health.

Other common themes related to the impact on staff and students, in relation to for example workload (36 comments, e.g. (13)) and the student experience (23 comments, e.g. (12)). There was a high amount of overlap between these comments and those which expressed concern about redundancies (48 comments) or staff voluntarily leaving (see section 5.9).

- (12) I am greatly concerned about the proposed restructure. Speaking purely about education and the student experience (rather than, say, research), I do not believe it will deliver the benefits claimed by the VC and UEB... although the pattern is admittedly not uniform, it is notable that the larger (in terms of student numbers) Schools and Departments that currently exist within the University tend to perform worse in the National Student Survey. These points suggest that, far from achieving its stated aims, the restructure will in fact be counterproductive (not to mention the drain on resources and corresponding stress involved in implementing it).
- (13) I fail to see how the proposed restructure would reduce workloads, when it will result in fewer jobs. I doubt there are very many staff at this university naïve enough to believe the VC's insistence that this "is not a cost cutting measure". Many of the proposed 'schools' seem like little more than clumsy mergers of only vaguely related departments (East Asian Studies and Music??), which will surely dissuade potential academics and students from joining - why would a top music academic want to join the 'School of Languages, Cultures and Music' for example? We currently have the #1 ranked Information School in the world; something which we will lose, making the university significantly less attractive to potential academics and students alike.

The last widespread theme relates to the details of the current restructuring proposal related to equalities, which included reference to impacts on both staff and students. These 18 comments tended to make reference to particular departments and schools, as in the following comment on the current School of East Asian studies, which is proposed to combine with several other 'academic units', in contrast to the School of English, which is not proposed to be altered under the restructure plan (14):

- (14) English is also considered a separate 'language', discipline and culture, whereas the expertise of SEAS and SLC (among others) appear to be considered mergeable due to their status as cultural 'Others'. This represents an Anglo-American 'status-quo' approach to scholarship that is at odds with global best practice and the university's own stated ambitions of decolonising the curriculum. SEAS also has the highest proportion of non-European, and non-White colleagues who have historically faced precarious work contracts and discrimination, so the fact that it was a decision made by an all-white panel of scholars with little expertise outside of the Global North is also galling.

Overall, the plan suggest a colonialist attitude to what schools 'should' fit together and will likely have severely negative impacts on Sheffield's reputation in East Asia. The fact that this has not been considered by UEB is deeply embarrassing and downright dangerous.

5.7 Restructuring at Sheffield and other Universities

Another common theme, referenced in 58 comments, included concerns about the current restructure proposal in relation to previous restructures, including the recent creation of the School of Biosciences and the ongoing restructure of the Faculty of Health to create schools (15). This theme also included comments on the

recently completed Student Recruitment and Marketing, which overlapped heavily with the impact on Professional Services staff, mentioned in 41 comments (16).

- (15) a. Personal experience with the formation of the School of Biosciences suggests this will be a disaster for the University overall. Degree programs HAVE been cut, including ones which had top NSS scores. Three departments were merged to form the School but one of these groupings dominates the others in terms of management. Workloads for certain individuals have increased a lot. Some support staff have gone or been moved out.
 - b. Having recently been through a restructure, it is also depressing that many of the issues that we had - missing information, contradictions in meetings, important emails at 5pm - are already happening again. We gave substantive feedback following our restructure about how the incompetence of the process and a lack of planning had significantly added stress, uncertainty and led to a negative culture which undermined the benefits of the restructure. Despite promises we are yet to have a response, and worse, it appears that there's been no learning from previous experiences.
- (16) This restructure shares the same lack of communication and woefully poor forward thinking that the SRMA one did. The SRMA restructure led to many good people leaving their posts rather than end up competing for jobs they didn't want with their colleagues. Now there are huge shortfalls in staff across SRMA, Faculty hubs and departments - a self-inflicted brain drain. I foresee the same happening again with this new restructure - good staff will leave and the student experience will suffer as a result, with remaining professional services staff suffering the burden of picking up several jobs at once.

5.8 Process: Timeline, Scale, Consultation and Governance

There were 98 comments which made reference to the process of the restructure, 95 of which were entirely negative in tone. Some of the themes which emerged in these comments have been covered in Section 3, including the risks posed by a fast timeline for consultation, the lack of staff input into the development of the proposal compared to other universities, and a lack of trust that concerns raised during the current consultation period will substantively alter managements' intended plans.

Themes that have emerged in addition to those include: A lack of information available to staff during the current consultation period, a lack of respect for staff and/or university governance procedures (17), and the risks of the proposed timeline for implementation to university operations, including the REF (18).

- (17) Lastly, I wish to register serious concerns about the disregard that management appear to be displaying towards the University's proper governance procedures. The compressed timescale for 'consultation', the rescheduling of crucial governance meetings and the premature communication with students all show that senior management wish to push this proposal through as quickly as possible, without allowing time for due scrutiny and balanced discussion. In doing so, they have all but removed Senate and (more importantly) Council's ability to object, paying only lip service to those powers. This is, in my opinion, no way to run a university.

- (18) a. From a technical side it will be impossible to implement the restructure within the timeframes given without resorting to ad-hoc patches and fixes which introduce an unacceptable level of risk to the University's operations. As has already been the case with the changes to department and faculty structures that are currently in progress.
- b. In addition to the risk to jobs and inequality impacts of the proposals, the timeline for the proposed change puts the REF28 submission in jeopardy - disruption to support etc.

5.9 Lack of Confidence

There were 70 comments expressing a lack of confidence in the University Executive Board in relation to this proposal (19). We included in this category comments questioning the stated motivations for the restructure and how/why it is has been proposed (20).

- (19) I have very little faith or confidence in the current University leadership. This restructuring seems to be a poorly justified and poorly communicated proposal. It may also be a very poorly conceived proposal too - it's just hard to tell that, for the two previously stated reasons.
- (20) It's incredibly disingenuous to suggest, as UEB did at the briefing, that this is something that arose from discussions with staff - whether or not that be the case, it hasn't arisen from *open* discussion - people will not have known that their views were to be used to justify a whole-university restructure and had they been told it was a possible option, likely their responses would have been different.

Finally, there were certain comments which referred to wanting to leave the university in response to the restructure, either via a Voluntary Severance Scheme, or by proactively seeking other employment (21). Although there were only 10 comments in this category (2.4% of commenters), the severity of the risk posed by this characterisation of employment at the University of Sheffield warrants their inclusion in this report.

- (21) I am already applying for new roles, and do not expect to still be at Sheffield in two years' time. This is a direct consequence of the restructure; I wouldn't be doing so otherwise.

6 Conclusions

The results of this survey evidence a strongly negative response by staff at the University of Sheffield to the proposed 'New Schools' Restructure. In addition to particular concerns raised around the impacts of implementing the proposal on academic disciplines, research, teaching, workload, equalities, and job security, the quantitative and qualitative data is consistent in expressing a lack of confidence in the consultation process and the timeline. As expressed by one respondent (22):

- (22) The scale of the change currently being embarked on, in the context of the lack of consultation, the lack of buy-in from staff, the lack of a clear narrative about 'what next', and the lack of learning from previous restructures, makes me extremely fearful about what the impact of this proposal will be.

One striking finding from both the quantitative and qualitative portions of this analysis is the substantive similarities in responses by union members and non-union members.

It is natural to ask in general to what extent the views of members of campus unions are commonly held by non-members. This survey provides clarity on this, at least with regard to at least the topics discussed here, the opinions are similar, and the only difference is a small difference in degree of how strongly certain opinions are held. To reiterate: the majority of respondents are decidedly unconfident that this restructure will lead to positive changes for this university or their own jobs, and only a small minority of staff are confident that it will.

The results of this survey suggest that the current 'New Schools' Restructure poses significant risks to core University activities if it goes ahead in its current form, and on the timeline that has been proposed. We strongly encourage the University Executive Board to withdraw the proposal and work with staff and students to consider whether portions of it may be revised to be of more benefit to the university. In the absence of this occurring, we urge the University Senate not recommend the proposal be passed in its current form, and the University Council to not support its implementation.