

UJS Cultural Review 2026: Summary Report

This report presents the findings of a study by the Union of Jewish Students (UJS) into the culture and atmosphere of Jewish student spaces, with a particular focus on Jewish societies (JSocs) and UJS national event programming. The research was conducted over the first three months of 2026 and is the first study of its kind undertaken by UJS.

The research was designed specifically to surface potential experiences of exclusion. Participants were therefore recruited from groups that may be underrepresented or marginalised in Jewish student spaces, including students of colour, disabled and neurodivergent students, LGBTQ+ students, students with diverse denominational identities, and women and gender minorities.

The findings should consequently be read as a focused exploration of issues raised by this particular research pool, rather than as a representative account of all Jewish students' experiences. They should not be taken to mean that exclusion is the defining experience of JSoc or UJS spaces, or that all Jewish students share the experiences described here. Many students continue to tell us that their time in JSoc and UJS spaces has been overwhelmingly positive.

However, the fact that these experiences are not universal does not make them unimportant. Where students describe barriers to participation or experiences of exclusion, we have a responsibility to listen carefully and consider what should change. The recommendations that follow are therefore focused on the specific issues raised through this research, not on every aspect of UJS or JSoc practice.

Equally, where a particular issue is not mentioned, that should not be read as a lack of concern. UJS already works to support inclusion across Jewish student life, and this report is one part of an ongoing process of listening, learning and improving. We will continue to create opportunities for feedback and participation from all Jewish students, and to adapt our practice in line with our values and core principles.

Methodology

The review was conducted with a sample of 37 students from 18 universities, using semi-structured interviews and focus groups. Participants were recruited with purposive and snowball sampling.

Among the final sample, 33 were undergraduates and 4 were postgraduates. 30% identified as LGBTQ+, 57% as women or as part of a gender minority, and 35% as having a disability and/or being neurodivergent. Denominationally, the sample was made up of 32% Progressive, 29% Orthodox, 26% Masorti, and 13% secular students. The sample was 86% Ashkenazi, 11% Mizrahi and 3% Sephardi.

The study adhered to British Sociological Association ethical [principles](#) throughout.

Finding 1: Variable JSoc Culture and Atmosphere

JSoc culture varies significantly across the country, particularly in how they 'feel' to new students. 'Medium-sized' JSocs received the most positive feedback on inclusivity. The largest societies, often called "Jew-nies", were most frequently described as cliquy and culturally "North London centric." Students described walking into events and feeling unwelcome, as if friendship circles were pre-established. For those arriving without an existing social network, this was a real deterrent to participation.

Some JSoc cultures were experienced as alcohol-centric, which excluded some students who do not drink. For neurodivergent students, these dynamics were often compounded: loud environments, alcohol-centred socialising, and tight-knit social circles made it especially hard to find a way in.

Recommendations

UJS should work with JSocs to build in structured socialising: icebreaker events at the start of each term, and guidance on making events accessible to students attending alone. JSocs should also be encouraged to programme regular events that are not centred on alcohol, such as coffee mornings, craft sessions, or learning events, alongside their existing infrastructure.

Finding 2: Barriers to Entry

Students described a range of practical, sociocultural, and intellectual barriers that made it difficult to take part in JSoc and UJS events. Friday Night Dinners and Shabbat events frequently assumed a level of Hebrew literacy and religious knowledge that many students did not have. Where prayer books were provided, they often lacked transliteration, and page numbers were not announced. Several students noted that national UJS events carried similar assumptions. A recurring theme was the desire for active signalling that different levels of Jewish knowledge are welcome, and that it is genuinely “okay to not know” aspects of Judaism. Several students with patrilineal Jewish heritage described being told directly they were not welcome in JSoc spaces. This is a clear violation of UJS’s own constitutional definition of Jewish membership, which recognises anyone identified as Jewish by any of the major UK or Irish Jewish umbrella bodies.

Postgraduate students, particularly PhD candidates, felt a lack of events that catered for their needs, and several spoke of isolation in Jewish student spaces.

Recommendations

UJS should communicate more consistently about its constitutional definition of Jewishness and ensure JSocs are aware of it and maintain the expected UJS constitutional standards. UJS should also seek to distribute transliterated Shabbat and religious festival materials and accessible educational resources more widely. UJS should develop an online network for postgraduate students, and encourage JSocs to appoint a postgraduate representative on their committees.

Finding 3: Religious and Political Imbalance

Different JSoc cultures can create varying degrees of exclusion for students from different denominational backgrounds.

Some Progressive Jewish students reported a lack of visibility and provision for egalitarian religious practice within JSoc spaces. In other cases, Orthodox Jewish students described feeling that their halakhic standards (particularly around keeping Kosher) were not properly accommodated by their JSoc. Students also reported confusion and frustration at a perceived absence of clear guidance on external speakers.

Recommendations

UJS should develop clear speaker guidelines to help JSoc committees navigate decisions. UJS should deepen its relationships with Progressive Jewish Students, University Jewish Chaplaincy, and Masorti Judaism’s student branch Marom. Clearer kashrut guidance for JSoc spaces and support from UJS sabbaticals would also help address some of the practical tensions around Orthodox inclusion.

Finding 4: Neurodivergent and Gender based exclusion

Neurodivergent students described many JSoc events as overwhelmingly loud and poorly designed acoustically. Quiet spaces are rare, and where they do exist, are often misused or inadequately enforced. Participants who identified as Jewish students of colour described experiencing racial microaggressions, including being repeatedly asked by students about their origins in ways that white (passing) peers were not. Disabled and neurodivergent students also reported experiencing the use by others of casual ableist language.

Cisgender male dominance in some JSoc spaces was raised, with some participants experiencing a “boys club” atmosphere. Loud and physically assertive behaviour was reported at events, as well as homophobic, misogynistic and transphobic comments in-person and on group chats. Some women and LGBTQ+ students reported this made some events feel unwelcoming.

Recommendations

UJS should continue to uphold a zero-tolerance policy on discriminatory language and a transparent complaints procedure, alongside a public commitment to LGBTQ+ inclusion and anti-misogyny. UJS should distribute sensory-friendly “quiet room” kits to JSocs with suitable facilities, and provide anti-racism training for Sabbatical Officers and JSoc committees.

Finding 5: UJS National Programming and Ashkenormativity

UJS Convention was appreciated for its range of religious service options and breakout sessions. However, some students still felt like outsiders at national events, not unlike what they had experienced at their own JSocs.

The most consistent criticism of national programming (predominantly convention) was its Ashkenormativity: the tendency, often subtle and unconscious, to treat Ashkenazi Jewish culture as the default. Students noted the absence of Sephardi and Mizrahi foods, melodies, and traditions at Shabbat meals and national gatherings.

Recommendations

UJS should introduce more structured meet-and-greet opportunities at national events to make them feel less reliant on prior connections. Song sheets should be reviewed and broadened to include a wider range of Jewish musical traditions. Menus at national programmes should reflect non-Ashkenazi Jewish food traditions.

Conclusion

Our sample was deliberately focused on students with experience of exclusion, and the findings should be read in that light. They are not representative of all Jewish students, many of whom have told us their experiences of JSoc and UJS have been positive. However, we as an organisation are committed to reflecting regularly on where we can be doing better, to ensure our spaces are as accessible as they can be for all.

Despite its relatively small sample size, this research offers important and actionable insights into the barriers some Jewish students face engaging with JSoc and UJS spaces. The diversity of JSoc size, location, and culture means that improvement strategies will need to be flexible and context-sensitive. Several overarching priorities are nonetheless clear across the findings: strong institutional infrastructure, clear policies, better-resourced committee training, and a genuine public commitment to inclusion across the Jewish student community’s diverse religious, racial, gender, and disability lines. With the right tools and leadership, Jewish student spaces can be meaningfully open to all.

The full UJS Cultural Review report is available on request. For more information, please contact the Union of Jewish Students – info@ujis.org.uk