Speak Week 2023 Insight Report

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# Executive Summary

The University of Surrey Students’ Union ran Speak Week in May 2023, the purpose of which was to provide students with the opportunity to provide feedback about their experiences at the University of Surrey, and to provide Union officers with insight into the current priorities for students. We gathered a broad range of feedback via two **core questions,** and more detailed insight via our **focus groups. This report details the insight learned from the 264 responses to our core questions and our 23 focus group attendees.**

The key priorities for students highlighted in this report relating to University provision are the affordability and accessibility of **campus spaces and facilities**, and improvements to the **academic experience** at Surrey. Within the Union, students want to see changes to the delivery of **nightlife and events**. Several areas of interest raised are of direct shared interest to both organisations, including improved **visibility** **and** **communication**, enhanced **student support**, and continued attention towards the impact of the **cost of living crisis**. We recommend that these findings are considered when setting the priorities for the work of the Union in the 2023-24 academic year.

# Introductions

## Megan Simmons - Vice-President Voice 21-22, 22-23

*“Authentic student feedback on University and Students’ Union activity can be hard to come by outside of structured surveys such as NSS and Pulse, with both mainly focused on quantitative data. Speak Week provided Surrey Students’ Union a great opportunity to seek student-led, qualitative feedback on changes they would like to see addressed by both the University and their Students’ Union. It was a great joy to talk to students during this campaign and engage the student community through accessible but thought-provoking questions which provided us with some amazing insights! This has also been a brilliant project to work on in collaboration with Kiara as our incoming VP Voice, and has established Speak Week as a fresh new precedent for how the Voice Zone reaches out to students for their views.”*

## Kiara Kataike-Lunani - Voice Zone Part-Time Officer 22-23, Vice-President Voice 23-24

*“Running Speak Week was important to me as a Voice Zone Part-Time Officer because I wanted to encourage students to take advantage of opportunities to speak out on areas of improvement without being limited in their responses. As incoming VP Voice, what we have learned from Speak Week will allow me to set a clear agenda for my time in office, ensuring my efforts are focused specifically on what students care most about. I would like to thank all the students who took part in this campaign. This campaign was a key point on my original manifesto and words cannot describe how elated I am to see it come to life. I’m delighted at the range of feedback we received, and I’m dedicated on utilising this insight for the betterment of the student experience at Surrey.”*

# Speak Week 2023

## Speak Week Purpose & Activities

The University of Surrey Students’ Union introduced Speak Week in May 2023 as a new campaign designed to provide students with the opportunity to provide feedback about their experiences at the University of Surrey. The purpose of Speak Week was to gather student feedback, to engage students with the Union, and to utilise student feedback to provide Union officers with insight into the current views, concerns, and priorities for students.

Speak Week ran from 1 May to 5 May, and involved a range of opportunities for students to get involved and share their views. Activities during the campaign included physical ballot boxes which were placed around campus and an identical online ballot was promoted on social media to ensure students off-campus could also participate. Stands were set up in busy areas of the University, where Union representatives encouraged students to fill out the ballot cards. The campaign also involved four focus group sessions to gather more detailed feedback on different Zones within the Union. During the week, we also ran Student Voice Forum, where over 40 students attended in-person to ask questions to a panel of senior University leadership on a range of topics. We also ran a social media campaign to highlight feedback opportunities and to showcase the representative role of the Students’ Union.

## Research Methods

The insight gathered during Speak Week emerged from our two primary research activities. We gathered a broad range of feedback via our **core questions,** and more detailed insight via our **focus groups.**

**Core questions:** Our two core questions were available on feedback cards submitted via our physical ballot boxes. We also gave attendees at our focus groups, Student Voice Forum, our Annual Members Meeting, and Society and Club Committee training the opportunity to complete the core questions, which were also hosted digitally via the Union website and social media.

The core Speak Week 2023 questions were:

1. **What would you do if you were in charge of the University for a day?**
2. **What would you do if you were in charge of the Students’ Union for a day?**

In response to the two core Speak Week questions, we received **169 responses to question one**, and **95 responses to question two.**

In total, we received 264 responses to our core questions during Speak Week 2023.

Responses have been fully anonymised. Responses to these questions highlighted that some students may not be fully aware of the distinctions between the University and Students’ Union, particularly in relation to oversight of activities and initiatives. Our gathered responses, therefore, have been grouped and analysed together to draw out the insight detailed in this report. One recommendation for Speak Week 2024 will be to **simplify the core question to rely less on required knowledge of University/Students’ Union distinctions.**

**Focus groups:** Our focus groups ran from 2 May to 5 May, each focused on a different Zone within the Union. Focus group participants were recruited via email and social media, and were reimbursed for their time. Each focus group lasted an hour. We had 23 attendees across the 4 groups, and each group was facilitated by the Student Voice Manager.

The insights in this report are informed by the responses gathered to our two core questions and the responses gathered in our focus groups relating to the Union and University more generally. Detailed reports for each Zone regarding the specific discussions in each focus group will be made available in addition to this report.

# Insight – Responses to Core Questions

## Detailed Overview – University Interests

### Theme 1: Campus Facilities

61 responses were received which related to campus facilities. The recurring themes across this group were **accommodation services, transport,** and **academic, social, and catering facilities.**

#### Accommodation Services

13 responses were received relevant to accommodation services. The common theme in these responses was the **affordability** of accommodation and services such as Circuit Laundry, and the availability of low-cost accommodation.

#### Transport

13 responses were received relevant to transport services. The majority of responses relating to transport referenced **transport costs** and the **reliability/regularity of services.** Several students mentioned poor transport links between Stag Hill campus and Hazel Farm as being in need of improvement.

#### On-Campus Facilities

35 responses were received relevant to on-campus academic, social, and catering facilities. The main theme emerging from feedback relevant to campus facilities was **accessibility**, with 7 responses directly referencing the accessibility of certain areas on campus or campus as a whole. A secondary theme was the **affordability** of campus facilities, primarily at Simply Fresh.

Other recurring responses included:

* Improved multi-faith provision at Manor Park, especially the Vet School
* Longer opening hours for areas such as the Nest, Spark, and Hive
* Increased study space provision at Manor Park and improved systems for booking study space on campus
* Greater number of gender-neutral bathrooms
* Increased vegetarian and vegan food options
* Updating/renovating teaching spaces.

### Theme 2: Academic Interests

41 responses to the core questions made reference to academic life at Surrey.

#### Assessment and Feedback

13 responses directly referenced assessment and feedback processes. In regards to assessment, the main recurring theme was a desire for **innovative assessment,** including more flexible assessment types for neurodivergent students and to cater to different learning styles, and innovation in **digital assessments**. Some students also called for greater flexibility in the **duration of online exams**, whilst others were concerned particularly with the **timetabling** and **spacing** of exams, especially in final year. Finally, several students called for better assessment preparation including the provision of mock exams as standard. In regards to feedback, the responses highlighted a desire for assessment feedback to be shared with students in a timely manner across modules.

#### Course Organisation

The key theme across responses relating to course organisation was **timetabling**. Students called for less change to timetables after publishing, fewer 9am timetabled sessions, more small group teaching sessions in the timetable, and making better use of the timetable for non-academic sessions or events such as the Consent Course and MEQs. One suggestion called for a “calendar of mandatory modules” which students need to complete, both academic and non-academic.

Another recurring theme was **accessibility**, suggesting the continued improvement of teaching spaces and ensuring the timetabling of teaching sessions took accessibility needs of students into account when choosing rooms.

Several responses requested changes to the **MEQ procedure**, with the common theme being MEQ timing, with requests for MEQs to take place after exams to allow for exam feedback to be included in MEQ reviews. Other feedback about MEQs also included suggestions for timetabled slots to undertake MEQs and adding incentives for taking part such as University or departmental merchandise.

#### Career Support

Another consistent theme both in this group and others was the desire for improved **careers support**, such as more careers events and expanded ethical career options. One suggestion included implementing an ethical careers policy, and another suggested departmental careers fairs to highlight directly relevant careers per subject/department.

#### Miscellaneous Responses

Other recurring academic responses included:

* Opportunities to connect with students within departments and in other subject areas
* Reducing the amount of academic jargon to make lectures more accessible
* Improve information available about modules ahead of module selection eg. teaching style, available resources
* Improve communication/contact with departments, eg. via the MySurrey app
* Improved support and course organisation for February starters eg. reduce adverse impact from starting in semester 2 without having studied in semester 1.

## Detailed Overview – Union Interests

### Theme 1: Union Venues, Nightlife, and Events

58 responses across the two core questions were relevant to the Union’s provision of **social venues**, **nightlife**, and **events**.

The key theme emerging from these responses was a desire for “more” events, though some responses did not provide specific suggestions for the types of events they would like to see more of. The suggestions that were received included:

* More events for faith communities and social groups
* A wider range of Rubix themed nights
* Increased events outdoor/by the Lake, such as a fun fair or summer festival
* More events and activities at Manor Park
* Bigger calendar of events for Surrey Pride
* More free and non-alcoholic events, including Dog Therapy and Careers Fairs
* More student-led events.

Other recurring responses included:

* Later entry to Rubix
* Affordability of tickets and drinks at Union venues
* Alternative DJs

### Theme 2: Societies and Clubs

10 responses were directly related to Sports Clubs and Societies. Three responses were related to specific societies, but for the general suggestions, the main theme was increased **funding** for societies.

In addition, several responses which related more directly to Union events referenced Societies and Clubs, primarily calling for **increased support** to societies and clubs running their own events, and for more student-led events including and beyond those provided by societies and clubs. Some responses also expressed a desire for more social spaces including bookable spaces for student groups.

## Detailed Overview - Shared Priorities

A range of responses highlighted areas for improvement which directly relate to both the University and Union.

### Theme 1: Communication

28 responses that relate to communication were gathered across both core questions, highlighting improvements for both University and Union communication to students.

#### Communication Methods & Tone

The main theme emerging from these responses were regarding the **methods** used to communicate with students, and the **tone** used to deliver key messages. Practical suggestions included:

* Fewer emails
* More posters to advertise events
* Updated digital contact options/touchpoints for University services to reduce reliance on email
* Increased use of social media
* Less of a “University as a business” approach.

#### Union Visibility

Some responses directly referenced improved communication of the Union’s role and the services and events on offer at the Union. Union visibility was cited several times, and in particular, increased promotion of Union services such as **Welfare Watch** and **Nightline** were noted as being potential avenues for increased visibility.

#### Union Website

5 responses directly referenced improvements to the **Union website** as a priority for increasing understanding and clearer communication of events and Union services to students. These responses focused primarily on the website being easier to use and navigate.

### Theme 2: Student Support and Inclusion

35 responses across the two core questions highlighted a need for **improved student support** and **inclusion** at University across both academic and social environments.

#### Student Support Services

Responses to the core questions highlighted a desire for **improvements to student support services**. These included references to the Personal Tutor scheme, calling for improved training for tutors, and more assistance from the Disability and Neurodiversity Service in advocating for students in accommodation.

Improved mental health and wellbeing support also arose a recurring theme, with students suggesting improvements such as increased support after returning from a deferral, improved access to support and education for academics on how to support students, and more **proactive mental health support**. One response called for “more compassion towards students, their circumstances, and problems”.

#### Diversity and Inclusion

Several responses called for better support for certain student groups in addressing feelings of **belonging and inclusion**. These groups included February starters, postgraduate students, international students, LGBTQIA+ students, and Black, Asian, and Minority Ethnic students. Diversity as a more general theme emerged several times, with suggestions including diversity training as part of programmes on offer for students. Suggestions to improve a sense of belonging and inclusion also included more opportunities for socialising and networking.

**Accessibility** and improved support for disabled and neurodivergent students emerged again in this group, with students calling for attention in these areas to help address issues of inclusion and wellbeing.

### Theme 3: Cost of Living

16 responses across the two core questions directly referenced **student money issues** or **University/Union funding issues**, with several more across other themes referencing **affordability** of various services.

#### Student Money Issues

The main recurring theme relating to individual money issues was support for **international students** in both the cost of University fees and also in funding opportunities for further study/research. Similarly, improved pay for PGRs who support teaching

In addition to these responses, responses grouped with other themes highlighted student concerns around **affordability** of student life, in particular in relation to campus accommodation, catering, and events. Cost of Living therefore appears to remain a key priority for students across many of these areas.

#### University/Union Funding

Another set of responses highlighted a recurring theme of suggestions for **increased funding** for core areas, including the Centre for Wellbeing and the Students’ Union. This also included suggestions such as more **incentives** or reimbursement for student volunteers, and more **employment opportunities** within the Union. Finally, two responses suggested a desire for increased **transparency** on how finances are used within the University.

## Detailed Overview - Miscellaneous Responses

4 responses were received to the core question referencing the University which did not fit into the above themes. These were:

1. More “Surrey spirit” (including better merch and incentives to watch Team Surrey compete)
2. Improved support for student entrepreneurs
3. Reduced “campus focused” attitude
4. Unbanning websites hosting adult content/products.

10 responses were received relating to the core question referencing the Union which did not fit into the above themes.

1. Increased ownership of decisions for students
2. Improved nomination process for awards (including how student feedback is used)
3. More advertising of skills platform
4. Improved support for VP Activity position to effectively support both societies and clubs
5. No suggested improvement/positive feedback about current Union work (x 6).

# Insight – Focus Groups

Our four focus groups had a primary focus on gathering deeper qualitative insight on the activities of each of the Zones within the Union. Each focus group, however, started with our core Speak Week questions, and several introductory questions about the Union in general, and a summary of the insights emerging from those questions is presented here. Responses during focus groups to the core questions, relevant to the Union and University, were grouped and detailed above.

### Three words to describe the Union

53 words had **positive sentiments**:

10 words had **negative sentiments**:

* Welcoming/approachable (11)
* Supportive/helpful (10)
* Hard-working/active (9)
* Fun/social (7)
* Student-led/trustworthy (7)
* Inclusive/diverse (5)
* Communicative/visible (4)
* Unhelpful/limited (4)
* Unclear/unknown (3)
* Distant/hard to contact (2)
* Un-inclusive (2)

### Purpose of the Union

Participants were asked to describe the purpose of the Students’ Union. The descriptions provided of the purpose of the Union highlighted a strong understanding of the mission and representative role of the Union. Out of the 23 responses, **21** made reference to **representing students’ views and voices**, **12** mentioned **providing support** to students, and **10** included **providing social opportunities** and activities for students. Whilst responses to the core questions highlighted that students may be less familiar with the exact delegation of responsibility for various services within the University and Union, responses to this question highlighted a general strong understanding of the role and purpose of a Students’ Union.

### Union Priorities for 23-24

Participants were asked to suggest what they think the Union should focus on in the coming academic year. The 23 responses to this question fell into the following categories:

* More opportunities to socialise (eg. within departments, with different student groups, for international students) x 4
* Cost of living x 3
* Careers support and personal development x 3
* Communication/visibility x 2
* Inclusivity/belonging x 2
* Campus safety x 2
* Accommodation support and advocacy x 2
* More non-drinking events x 2
* Support for clubs and societies x 2
* Sustainability
* Improved student spaces

# Recommendations

One purpose of Speak Week was to provide outgoing and incoming Union Officers with contemporary insight into the views, concerns, and priorities for students. We therefore recommend that the Speak Week report is factored into the setting of priorities for the incoming officer team in establishing a focus for relevant campaigns. We also recommend that the findings in this report are considered when setting the priorities for Union and University partnership at the University and Students’ Union Committee for 23-24.