

**SURREY
STUDENTS'
UNION**



Speak Week Insight Report

November 2023

Your Surrey *Life.*

Contents

Executive Summary.....	3
Introduction – Kiara Kataike, Vice-President Voice 23-24	3
Speak Week November 2023 Summary	3
Research Methods	4
Core Questions Insight: University Changes	4
Theme 1: Campus Life.....	5
Theme 2: Academic Experience	5
Core Questions Insight: Union Changes.....	7
Theme 1: Venues, Nightlife, & Events.....	7
Theme 2: Clubs & Societies.....	7
Theme 3: Student Voice & Advocacy	7
Core Questions Insight: Shared Changes	8
Theme 1: Support & Inclusivity	8
Theme 2: Employability.....	9
Theme 3: Ethical Conduct & Sustainability	9
Theme 4: Cost of Living	9
Theme 5: Communication.....	9
Focus Groups Insight.....	10
Union Strategy Consultation	11
Biggest Issues	11
Negative Experiences.....	12
Positive Experiences.....	13
Conclusion.....	14

Executive Summary

The University of Surrey Students' Union ran Speak Week in November 2023, providing students opportunities to provide feedback about their experiences at the University of Surrey. During this campaign and our parallel strategy consultation, we gathered **1596 pieces of feedback** from students. This report details this feedback, primarily from the **1186** answers given in **523** responses to our core questions and by **28** focus group attendees.

The key priorities for students relating to University provisions remain the **affordability and accessibility of campus spaces and facilities**, and **improvements to the academic experience** at Surrey. Priorities for changes to Union provision include **nightlife, events, and venues**, and improved **support for clubs & societies**.

Suggested changes to areas of shared interest include **wellbeing support and communication**. Across all themes, students continue to call for actions to address the impact of the **cost of living crisis**.

Introduction

"From its inception during my time as a Voice Zone Part-Time Officer, Speak Week has been near and dear to my heart. It has been incredible to give students the opportunity to voice their opinions beyond the traditional confines of quantitative surveys, enabling them to be as creative and free-thinking as they desire with their suggestions for change. It has been phenomenal to have received this amount of feedback and it will go a very long way in tailoring the Surrey student experience for current and future students. The compilation of this data into this Insight Report means it can be shared across the Students' Union and the University, creating opportunities for various changes powered by student feedback."



Kiara Kataike
Vice-President Voice 2023-24

Speak Week November 2023 Summary

Speak Week is the flagship campaign for the Voice Zone. The purpose of Speak Week was to gather student feedback to provide Union officers with insight into the current concerns, and priorities for students.

Speak Week ran from 20 – 24 November. During the campaign, physical ballot boxes were placed around campus and an identical online ballot was promoted on social media to gather suggestions for change. The campaign involved four focus group sessions to gather more detailed feedback from specific demographics. During the week, we also ran Student Voice Forum, where over 100 students attended online to ask questions to a panel of senior University leadership on a range of topics. We also ran a social media campaign and additional insight gathering activities beyond our core questions as part of our strategy consultation.

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: Responses to our core questions were gathered from physical and digital ballot boxes, at Student Voice Forum, Union Zone Committees, Student Equality Network, Union Forum, and in Course Rep meetings. The core 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?**

We received 1186 suggestions in answer to these questions from 523 responses during Speak Week 2023.

Responses were gathered anonymously. Both questions were optional to answer. 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 according to broad themes, regardless of which question the student had answered.

Focus groups: Each focus group was conducted with students from a different demographic of the student community; PGRs, PGTs, final year students, and international students. Focus group participants were recruited via email and social media, and were reimbursed for their time. Each focus group lasted an hour and was facilitated by the Student Voice Manager. 28 students attended across the 4 available sessions.

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. More detailed insight from discussions held in the focus groups are provided in a separate report.



Core Questions Insight: University Changes

496 suggestions were received which related to changes to University functions. The primary recurring themes across this set of responses were **catering, campus facilities, transport, and accommodation**.

Theme 1: Campus Life

319 suggestions were received which related to campus life. The primary recurring themes across this set of responses were **catering, campus facilities & transport, and accommodation**.

Catering

143 responses directly referenced catering and food shopping on campus. The majority of these responses were relating to the cost of food and drink sold in catering outlets on campus, along with reducing all prices in SimplyFresh. A small number of responses specifically called for SimplyFresh to be replaced with a more affordable alternative. Other responses which did not relate directly to cost included requests for improved availability and variety in food offering across both campuses, such as more diverse and cultural foods, or alternative dietary options.

Campus Facilities & Transport

117 suggestions centred on non-catering campus facilities, primarily including requests for improvements to be made to the attractiveness of campus buildings, improved communal spaces, and better room signposting and wayfinding. Laundry and car parking provision were also highlighted as key areas for improvement. We received a large number of assorted suggestions about improvements to campus, with suggestions including more charging points, more water dispensers, improved wi-fi, and a sensory room.

38 responses related directly to transport provision. All but one of these responses mentioned buses, with students calling for reduced travel costs, the reliability of bus services, and increased bus service provision between campuses and the city centre.

Accommodation

21 responses called for change to University accommodation. A number of these responses called for reduced prices or increased affordable accommodation availability, with other suggestions including improved heating, customer service within the accommodation team, and more social areas at Manor Park.

Theme 2: Academic Experience

177 suggestions were received which related to the academic experience at Surrey. The primary recurring themes across this set of responses were **academic resources & support, staff/student communication, timetabling, and assessment & feedback**.

Academic Resources & Support

88 suggestions related to the academic experience in relation to academic resources and support. These suggestions included practical requests focused around academic resources such as increased study spaces, improved provision of online resources including core texts, and enhanced digital technology in learning spaces including for attendance check-in. A number of responses focused on academic support and teaching quality, with students calling for more engaging lectures and more interactive seminars, opportunities to connect with other staff and students, including cross-departmental collaboration, and more information to be made available prior to module selection. A number of replies also cited support for PGT and PhD students, with suggestions including reduced tuition fees or increased stipends, and treating PhD students with more respect rather than “free labour”.



Staff/Student Communication

32 responses called for improvements to how staff interact with students. A significant portion of these responses suggested improved training for all staff in order to improve compassionate and understanding communication with students, and more specifically for academic and security staff. Suggestions for improved training primarily focused on mental health and wellbeing, EDI, and neurodiversity. The other prevalent theme in these responses was increasing staff availability for students seeking academic support or feedback on their work, so suggestions included increased office hours, greater clarity around staff availability, and improved pay and working conditions for staff to reduce the possibility of future industrial action and to reduce staff turnover.

Timetabling

28 responses referred to timetabling. On the topic of lecture and seminar scheduling, responses were split between wanting fewer early starts, fewer late finishes, fewer back-to-back sessions, and fewer large gaps between teaching sessions. It is clear from responses on this theme that students' preferences for scheduling vary depending on personal schedules, preferences, and living situations. A common theme, however, across responses, was a desire for timetabling information to be released earlier, and for greater consistency and reliability in how timetabling information is updated.

Assessment & Feedback

29 responses related to assessment and feedback, with the majority of responses focused on exam organisation and the scheduling of assessment deadlines. A prevalent request was for exam timetables to be released earlier, and for improved spacing of assessment deadlines during the exam period. Another common theme was around improved feedback organisation and quality following assessments, including requests for mandatory feedback for mock exams or formative assessments and earlier release of marks and feedback.

Core Questions Insight: Union Changes

351 suggestions related to changes to Union functions. The primary recurring themes were **venues, nightlife, & events, clubs & societies, and student voice & advocacy**.

Theme 1: Venues, Nightlife, & Events

234 responses related to the social experience within the Union. The primary recurring themes across this set of responses were **events, nightlife, and Union venues**.

Events

142 responses called for a greater number or variety of events. A high number of responses simply called for “more events”, though many students specified which events they would like to see more of. These included more free events, more cultural events, more day-time events such as festival-style events, and more sporting events. Students called for events at Manor Park and Hazel Farm, postgraduate events, and wellbeing events including Pet Therapy. A number of students called for more opportunities to meet new people, connect with people of shared cultural backgrounds or common interests, and more employability events.

Nightlife

70 suggestions related to the Union’s nightlife provision. Improvements to the Union’s club, Rubix, were suggested, including updated music, reduced prices, and more student input into the offerings at the venue. Students also called for more themed or genre-specific nights, women-only nights, and also alternative options to clubbing including movie nights and alcohol-free nights.

Venues

22 responses related to the Union’s venues more generally. The majority of these responses included suggestions for an improved Union building, calling for refurbishments to Rubix and throughout the building, and more student spaces within the building for student socialising or studying.

Theme 2: Clubs & Societies

57 responses directly related to **clubs & societies**.

Clubs & Societies

Responses in this theme were split between suggestions to improve the experience as a club or society committee member, and suggestions to improve the general provision of club and society activity within the Union. Responses falling into the former category focused on reduced administration for committee members, greater support for groups including higher budgets and transport funding, and more freedom for committees. Responses relating to club and society provision more generally saw students calling for cheaper memberships, showcasing group achievements, and more taster sessions.

Theme 3: Student Voice & Advocacy

60 suggestions were received which related to the Union’s role in **student voice & advocacy**.

Student Voice & Advocacy

Suggestions for change in relation to the Union’s role in providing student voice opportunities and advocacy on behalf of students primarily focused on offering more incentives for students to provide feedback, increasing outreach to specific groups of students, and lobbying the University to make specific changes for students.

Some students suggested improved communication of outcomes or “wins” from the Union’s advocacy work, whilst others suggested the Union hold drop-ins with the Officer team and could better promote the role and achievements of Sabbatical Officers.

Core Questions Insight: Shared Changes

317 suggestions were received which related to areas of shared provision or priority between both the University and Students’ Union. The primary recurring themes across this set of responses were **support & inclusivity, employability, ethical conduct & financial management, cost of living, and communication.**

Theme 1: Support & Inclusivity

104 responses were received on this theme, with **wellbeing support** and **inclusivity** emerging as sub-themes.

Wellbeing Support

60 responses related primarily to the provision of wellbeing support at Surrey. Suggestions included improvements to the availability of international student support and Disability and Neurodiversity support, and access to mental health support and resources. Some students referenced specific student groups who would benefit from improved support, including underrepresented groups, Black students, Vet School students, and international students. A number of students called for more wellbeing events including workshops, to address personal wellbeing and to also tackle student loneliness or feelings of social anxiety.



Inclusivity

44 suggestions highlighted the need for improved inclusivity in areas of University life, primarily relating to improved physical accessibility across campus through improvements to campus design, building refurbishments, and campus wayfinding. Other suggestions included period products in all bathrooms, creating a more welcoming environment for neurodiverse and disabled students, and fostering opportunities for students to connect within and across their own cultural and social groups. A small number also called for improved processes and policies, including for reporting concerns and bullying.

Theme 2: Employability

36 responses were received which directly related to **employability**.

Employability

The majority of responses relating to employability called for more job opportunities on campus, increased and improved career support, and a greater number of placements, internships, and opportunities to connect with potential employers. Specific suggestions for improved career support included requests for more tailored support and advice for specific disciplines and industries.

Theme 3: Ethical Conduct & Sustainability

27 number of responses were received which related to **ethical conduct and sustainability**.

Ethical Conduct & Sustainability

The majority of responses on this theme focused on the University's partnerships with external companies and sustainability. A number of students called for the University to only partner with companies with ethical values and commitments to sustainability, and for the University's own values to be communicated more clearly to students and embedded within departments. Responses focused more specifically on sustainability included implementing environmental pledges and policies, and to improve waste segregation procedures, recycling, and reduced plastic consumption across campus.

Theme 4: Cost of Living

44 number of responses were received which directly related only to **cost of living**, however concerns around the cost of services, events, and student life was a recurring theme across all other areas of gathered insight. Cost of living responses as they relate to specific areas of student life have been categorised under those specific relevant themes, whilst miscellaneous cost of living responses are summarised here.

Cost of Living

The majority of responses relating to cost of living related to campus services, accommodation, transport, and the social experience on campus. Miscellaneous responses directly referencing cost of living included requests for cheaper gym memberships, increased availability of bursaries and scholarships, and improved financial support rather than simply providing spending advice.

Theme 5: Communication

19 number of responses were received which related to the University's effective **communication** with students, whilst 65 number of responses related to the general **promotion of activity at the Students' Union**.

Communication

The majority of responses on this theme focused on streamlining the process of students seeking advice, support, or information, and improving response times and quality of communication with University service teams. A small number of students also called for more transparency in communication from University leadership, and more opportunities to feedback on university life.

Responses relating to Union communications suggested improving student awareness of Union services and events through increased promotion, especially with advance notice for events. A large number of responses also suggested updates to the Union website, and making the Union website easier to read and navigate.

Focus Groups Insight

During Speak Week, focus groups were conducted with 28 students. Focus groups were conducted with final year students, PGT students, PGR students, and international students.

During the focus groups, a wide range of questions were asked to assess the expectations students had before attending Surrey, and whether their experience had met their expectations whilst studying at the university. All attendees were also asked the Speak Week core questions, establishing what they would change about Surrey if they were in charge of the University or in charge of the Students' Union for a day. A separate Focus Group report highlights the broader insight gathered from these groups, but responses to the Speak Week core questions have been summarised here. The primary recurring themes across responses to our core questions from focus group attendees were **cost of living, student support, campus life, and social events**.

Cost of Living

71% of final year undergraduates highlighted their desire for improved financial support to ease the pressure on students arising from the increasing cost of living. Suggestions included cheaper bus travel, food vouchers, and reducing the price of food on campus and in SimplyFresh. PGT students also suggested improvements to support them financially, including subsidised train tickets or season passes.

22% of international students called for better support regarding tuition fees, primarily requesting earlier invoices or more support with paying fees, and 28% of final year undergraduates also suggested that the University should lower tuition fees for international students. PGRs highlighted potential changes to PGR stipends or the introduction of a travel stipend for PGRs who cannot work remotely.

Student Support

28% of final year undergraduates suggested more support to tackle loneliness.

PGRs raised requests for more direct channels to get support and to communicate with University services, due to issues caused by generic, central mailboxes in terms of the quality and timeliness of responses. These were changes also suggested by final year undergraduates.

International students suggested more support throughout the transition process after moving to England, including more language support and mental health support to tackle homesickness.

Employability support was also raised in all focus groups, particularly amongst PGT students and international students, with one suggestion asking for greater numbers of job opportunities on campus.

Campus Life

60% of PGT students said that they would change the look or design of campus, including adding more lights, and re-painting buildings to improve the visual aesthetic of campus. 40% of PGT students also suggested improving the quality and reliability of wi-fi provision on campus.

Social Events

One third of international students called for more events, especially tailored towards connecting with other international students, and to improve the promotion of these events to ensure student awareness.

PGRs also called for more events tailored to postgraduates, including day-time events or opportunities to connect with other researchers.

Union Strategy Consultation

During Speak Week, the Union also ran a parallel strategy consultation, gathering feedback from students to inform our new strategic themes and proposed Union values. Feedback was also sought from participants in our Focus Groups and at Student Voice Forum on the biggest issues facing them as students, and what aspects of University life they felt most and least positively about. Insight relating only to the Union's values are not summarised in this report, but insights gathered from students on the areas of biggest concern and the most and least positive aspects of studying at Surrey are summarised here.

Biggest Issues

Focus Groups

The most frequent issue cited by PGT students was in **finding a post-university job (40% of students)** and internships (20% of students). This included fears of competing against artificial intelligence, and being an international student wanting to remain in the UK. 28% of final year undergraduate students also felt the biggest issue in their lives was attempting to secure a graduate role.

Stresses over finances and the **cost of living** were cited by **71% of final year undergraduate students**, with several students mentioning the need to work part-time alongside studies and how this has impacted their ability to engage fully with their course. The toll on mental wellbeing was also highlighted here. The **cost of living** was also the most frequently mentioned issue facing international students (33%). Students cited rising accommodation and travel costs, and difficulties in getting part-time work. Postgraduate Taught and Research students also highlighted cost of living pressures as significant sources of frustration and stress.

Amongst international students, 44% mentioned an array of **academic matters** being their biggest issue. This included stresses caused by group work, and several assignments being due at the same time. Similarly, 28% of final year undergraduates also said they felt **overwhelmed** with balancing all the elements of university life (i.e. attending teaching sessions, studying, assessments, domestic tasks, part-time work, looking for a career).

Student Voice Forum

During Student Voice Forum, students described the biggest issues facing them at the moment as primarily relating to **cost of living, physical and mental health**, and pressures resulting from **exams and workload**.

Final Year Undergraduates

Accommodation was a significant issue for final year students, with nearly all focus group members claiming it to be a source of negativity during their experience at Surrey. Responses we received included:

- Anti-social behaviour from fellow students including noise, fire alarms, or smoking
- Poor quality accommodation including issues with pests, mould, or poor heating
- Lack of support from accommodation team
- Lack of availability of accommodation for non-first year students

International Students

Accommodation was also a significant cause for concern amongst international students. However, some of the responses differed to that of final year undergraduates. Responses we received included:

- Poor transport links to Hazel Farm
- Issues with card scanners in Manor Park
- Poor experiences with accommodation maintenance including wait times
- Lack of availability of accommodation in affordable bands

International students were the only group to mention difficulties in seeking support. Comments included issues being signposted to other teams, dealing with generic email addresses rather than personalised support, and difficulties in securing support whilst off-campus.

Positive Experiences

Focus Groups

During our Focus Groups, participants were asked to describe the most impactful elements of their experience as a student at Surrey which they had found to be positive.

Postgraduate Taught

80% of PGT students told us the most positive part of being a student at Surrey was the location, with half of these responses referencing the proximity to London, and the other half citing Guildford as a nice place to live. 60% of participants also described the campus as quiet and pleasant. PGT students also highlighted the advice and support by academic staff – 60% of students said this was the best thing about being at Surrey.

Postgraduate Research

Postgraduate-research students shared several positive sentiments about researching at Surrey, though there was no sole reason provided by a majority. Some prevalent comments from PGR students in regards to their positive experiences at Surrey (each mentioned by 28% of participants) included:

- The focus on the student experience
- Academic staff offering good advice
- Ability to choose their own working schedule

Final Year Undergraduates

Final year students were particularly positive about the opportunities university life at Surrey afforded them. 42% of the focus group said that the best part of being a student at Surrey was the new people they met and the friendships they made.

This focus group primarily discussed the social and professional development opportunities they had undertaken during their degree, including placements, being able to study abroad, and taking part in societies.

International Students

44% of international students told us that the support on offer at Surrey was the most positive element of the student experience. This included academic, careers, and mental health support. The quality and availability of resources to assist learning, such as the library, was also mentioned.

One third of the focus group commented on the sense of community at Surrey, with one saying that there was a “sense of internationalism” about the university. One third said the best thing about Surrey was the friendships they had made, and the opportunities there were to meet new people.

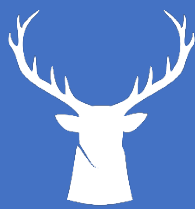
Conclusion

Across the insight gathered during Speak Week November 2024, it is clear that the key priorities for students remain the cost, quality, and variety of both academic and social services and resources. The primary areas of the Surrey student experience where students would like to see change occur are:

- The affordability and accessibility of campus spaces and facilities
- Improved academic resources, assessment & feedback, and interactions with University staff
- A wider variety of events and improved Union venues
- Increased support for clubs & societies
- Improved wellbeing support
- Enhanced communication and access to relevant information relating to services and events
- Action to address the impact of the cost of living crisis.

We suggest that the areas of priority identified by students during Speak Week is used by the incoming Officer team to inform and set the Union’s priorities for student representation in the coming academic year.





SURREY
STUDENTS'
UNION

*Your Surrey **Life.***