

Student Voice Forum

18:30 – 20:00, 20 February, Microsoft Teams Live Events

Membership

Role	Name	Initials
Union President (Chair)	Liam White	LW
Provost and Senior Vice-President	Professor Tim Dunne	TD
Pro-Vice-Chancellor Education	Professor Eunice Ma	EM
Interim Chief Students' Officer	Emma Rowsell	ER
Chief Operating Officer	Will Davies	WD

Introduction and Panel Updates

LW introduced the meeting by welcoming the Interim Chief Students' Officer, ER, who then briefly spoke about her new role and her capacity at the university.

TD then spoke about his role as Provost and provided a university update. He explained how 'Future Says Surrey' is funded and where these funds are spent – last year 300 scholarships were given out as a result of this. In the first campaign, around £70mil was raised, £10mil above the target of £60mil.

TD also mentioned that the university is unfortunately facing voluntary or compulsory redundancies due to budget shortages, similar to other universities. He also mentioned that the UCU, the main union, is considering industrial action and that the university hopes that this does not eventuate, but if it does occur then the university will have an effective plan in place and will ensure that there is strong communication with students and staff.

TD concluded his section by mentioning that planning season is happening and that each school is calculating resource needs and budgets. The university is also focusing on Vision 41 and the first 5 years of the plan. There are plans to create pan-university institutes, which have interdisciplinarity in the heart of it.

LW also mentioned that the NSS is live for all final-year students and EM explained more about the NSS and recent changes that have been implemented in some courses, which have occurred due to feedback received by students as part of the NSS.

LW welcomed the candidates for VP Voice and they briefly introduced themselves.

Theme 1: Student Feedback

Q1. How has student feedback from previous MEQs and the NSS influenced improvements at the University, and what further enhancements are planned?

EM previously mentioned some examples where student feedback from previous years has led to improvements in various subject areas. The MEQs from semester one are being analysed and will be used for future changes.

Q2. During the recent exam period, some student cohorts have fed back that they were negatively impacted by late exam scheduling changes. How will the University act on this to prevent these issues in the next exam period?

ER responded that there were 2 exams last semester which had to be changed, 300 students were affected due to the large module sizes of those exams. In general, the university moves exams back rather than forward if there have to be any changes, and the university tries to avoid exam changes. It is recommended that all students keep the exam period free in case of these changes.

Q3. All students at Surrey have access to MySurrey Voice, powered by Unitu, though engagement levels differ across the University. How does the University intend to gather student feedback to assess the benefits of this platform?

EM responded that MySurrey Voice played a significant role during the pandemic and the activity has decreased since then. Only 28% of students have activated their MySurrey Voice accounts. Currently, there are various other channels to communicate with students, e.g. course reps. EM has spoken with LV to gather feedback and analyse whether this platform should continue. EM strongly recommends that students activate their accounts.

ER also made supporting comments to this question and had similar views to EM. She stressed that communication and timely feedback from students is vital for the university to take actions to enhance student experience.

Questions from the Floor:

- a. Accommodation prices for next year have increased quite a lot – how can the university justify this? What can be done to support students who want to come to Surrey but can't afford to live here?**

University response: WD responded that the university tries to avoid increasing prices if they can, but price increases are inevitable due to inflation. He reassured that the university's accommodation is still cheaper and more competitive than most alternative options and also other universities' accommodations. He explained the factors that go into deciding prices for accommodation and explained that energy costs had gone up by £10mil over the last year so elements like these need to be paid back through the accommodation prices.

- b. How is the academic rigour of courses continually reviewed to ensure that they are challenging enough and up to date, to enable students to have the knowledge for jobs post-degree?**

University response: EM responded that there is a continuous enhancement plan which is done on an annual basis for every course, to assess academic rigour and the relevance of the course. Every 4-5 years there are also theoretical reviews for programmes which incorporate student feedback and also from external examiners and industrial partners/employers, to ensure the content delivered remains both challenging and aligned with the current professional standards.

TD added that there is very strong positive data about the student experience at Surrey and the educational provision overall, suggesting that the programme rigour is quite strong.

- c. Other universities have computers or technology recycling programmes in place where students can purchase depreciated or unused technology. Are there any plans or scope to implement such a thing at Surrey?**

University response: WD mentioned that there are no plans currently but there is an 'end of life' kit which makes these items available for various local charities. He mentioned that this will be taken away and he'll discuss if this is possible with the CIO, John Ward.

- d. Why are the BSc students the only degree type not to receive their own dedicated trim colour on their graduation gowns, like every other degree type has?**

University response: TD mentioned that this was discussed with LW recently and that the university is open to exploring ideas to change this. He mentioned that it will affect the university's supply chain and traditions but if students are asking for this then the university is open to looking further into it.

- e. Will the university be considering releasing timetables and exam dates much earlier in order to help with planning?**

University response: ER responded that usually universities struggle to get timetables out before semester one due to the large amount that happens between confirmation, clearing and welcome weeks. She mentioned that she is aware that the university is still using an old timetabling system which makes it difficult to speed up the process. This question will be taken away to the timetabling team to see if there is anything at all that can be done.

- f. Is there a way that the results of the SSLCs can be shared with the rest of the university? It would be beneficial to see what changes have been put in place and any solutions found.**

University response: ER and EM mentioned that they will try to figure out a way for these to be published. TD agreed that it is a good suggestion and that sharing outcomes will help highlight best practice across the university.

- g. In one of our courseworks, we collectively scored unusually low marks and there was no system for students to appeal academic judgements. How does the university balance between academic judgements and a student's right to appeal?**

University response: TD responded that a lot of factors are considered when making academic judgements, one of which is the degree of predictability of an assessment and also the quality of student intake. The main priority when assessing is to appropriate it to the course and also to the benchmarks.

EM also explained how the appeal system works and that students do have a right to appeal if there are procedural errors, but not just to negotiate on the individual marks.

- h. Can we have more help such as FAQs or helpful resources to understand the differences that part time students may face as a Surrey student? Even the module selections are different.**

University response: EM and ER responded saying that the FAQs idea is one that they will take away to see if it can be implemented. The module selection aspect will need to be discussed for the specific course as module selections vary course by course.

Theme 2: Student Success

Q1. The university has been working for a number of years to improve the black awarding gap. Is this still a priority for the university? What new strategies will be in place to resolve this challenge?

EM responded that she is working with ER to prepare a presentation to the Executive Board in two weeks time to look into this particular issues. She mentioned that this is a common challenge, as well as continuation completion – both are not at an acceptable level, although they are in alignment or slightly higher with the sector benchmark. Currently there are small number of actions which are effective in reducing the gap, for example, to have a more inclusive teaching and assessments, the university is looking at changing the policy and process to ensure fairer and more transparent marking.

EM also mentioned that there is a rigorous process of internal and external moderation that goes on when marking assessments. She also mentioned data informed intervention which will allow the university to regulate and analyse student data by ethnicity to identify the gaps and withdraw module pass rates and degree attainment at the programme levels.

ER spoke about how there are other focuses and actions around building confidence in report and support as a mechanism at university to report issues that occur on campus. She also

mentioned that there is a lot of work planned in the Access and Participation plan which was re-written last Summer and launches Summer 2025. This issue was one of the targets as priority in this plan.

TD also spoke about the importance that the university attaches to this issue, there are a lot of discussions and plans to reduce this gap.

Q2. The University's Vision 2041 Strategy sets out the University's ambition to grow significantly. How will each panel member ensure the services that they oversee remain high quality despite growing demand from increased student numbers?

WD mentioned that there is a lot of planning that goes into improving the delivery of educational excellence and the student experience. He explained which areas that he oversees, for this question he focused on IT and Estates, Campus Services and Sports Park. He mentioned that growing student numbers are a necessity for the growth and success of the university. In the long term, he mentioned that John is developing a digital strategy to ensure that the right information is being relayed to all parties. He noted Bright Space Pulse which was mentioned in the chat. With estates, he mentioned prioritising making sure there is enough information about accessible routes across campus. The provision of more accommodation is also another priority. At the moment, the team is in the process of putting in a solar farm in Blackwell Park that will create 12 megawatts of electricity – this is part of the sustainability initiative of the university – as well as putting in solar panels on the roof of the Sports Park.

ER mentioned that everyone has their own KPIs and targets they want to achieve in the near future, she mentioned hers is that she expects a student to be able to see a mental health practitioner within five days if it's not an emergency. This timeframe is monitored and she stressed the importance of this within a growing student population.

EM added that the university is closely monitoring student demand and recruit new staff where there is significant growth, e.g. computer science, law and economics, in order to continue to deliver high quality teaching, learning and student experience.

TD discussed how the business model of the university works to get a better understanding of the management of resources and how the university plans to approach the increased number of students.

Q3. The University is currently developing a new Employability strategy. What benefits can students expect to see in how the University supports their career success and professional development?

ER mentioned that the new Employability strategy fits within the Vision 2041 and is a strand within there. The main focuses for the first chapter of the strategy are to engage with employers through the curriculum and campus events, diversifying placement options for students, embedding employability skills into the curriculum and improving the employability

and careers service to meet the needs of students. The biggest focus is on driving up engagement with placement years as there has been a fall in demand in the past few years.

Questions from the Floor:

- a. Is it possible to improve the progress review process to ensure students have the opportunity to give their own feedback in the process?**

University response: TD mentioned that he will take this query away to Lisa Collins and he shared that he agrees that there should be greater involvement of students in the process.

- b. What is practically being done to ensure that our disabled students can succeed at Surrey?**

University response: ER responded that this is an area that is continuously worked on and involves the Disability and Neurodiversity teams. ER understands the accessibility issues that arise from the campus being built on a hill but there are discussions on how to improve accessibility across the campus. Student feedback is being used to understand students' point of views and create changes using that. She also mentioned using technology options instead of paid note-takers, AI tools that can provide digital translation of lectures into sign language.

- c. The university markets sustainability but lots of rooms have computers switched on and sometimes even Hillside Restaurant has the lights left on. Is this something worth looking into?**

University response: WD responded that there is a complicated 8 point plan around net-zero which is to develop renewable energy and use less energy. The university is looking into building opening hours to restrict the amount of buildings that remain open and therefore heated and lit overnight.

Closing Remarks

LW closed the meeting with final remarks. He reminded everyone to look at the candidates for the current elections for the elected officers team, and to attend Question Time on 24th and 25th February 2025. He also reminded final year students to fill out the National Student Survey.

Appendix 1: Unanswered Questions from the Floor

A number of questions were asked during the Forum which were not able to be asked during the event. They are included below with a response provided by the Panel after the Forum.

a) *Are you still accounting for using PGRs instead of staff to manage large cohorts and marking? As the pay is very low and the pressure is very high.*

- University response: We offer PGRs the opportunity to support a variety of teaching activities across the Schools. We get a mixture of different feedback from the PGRs on this topic. We consistently receive requests from some PGRs for the University to increase the opportunities for them to undertake paid teaching support activities. Equally, some PGRs report feeling under pressure as a result of the teaching support work they undertake. Consequently, we are currently undertaking work to investigate whether it is possible to create more PGR teaching opportunities where there is demand and, at the same time, clarify expectations to help relieve any pressure. PGRs receive uniform pay per hour for teaching support work across the university. The rate was reviewed in 2022 by a working group that included PGR representatives and an uplift on the Unitemps pay scale agreed.

b) *D2L, the SurreyLearn provider, has a mobile app called Brightspace Pulse, and supports functionality like push notifications, and allows students to access course content on the go. Can it potentially be enabled for SurreyLearn?*

- University response: The app has been considered before but it was decided that it overlapped with other functionality provided by the University (MySurrey App) and could be confusing. It has been a while since this decision was taken and it is something we could revisit. The Digital Learning team along with IT will need to review how this fits in with our current technology and plans for the future.

c) *Is there any extra support this year for PhD student?*

- University response: In addition to the School PGR action plans developed in response to the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES), this year we are also working to develop a central PGR action plan to help address key concerns and provide a range of additional support for the PGR community. A draft plan is to be reviewed by the University's Management and we hope to be able to open this up for wider consultation in the very near future.

d) *What plans are in place to introduce captions to module videos? Currently there's a large proportion of content that isn't accessible to hard of hearing and neurodiverse students?*

- University response: We are committed to providing accessible content for all students where possible. All module videos in Panopto (the main platform for learning and teaching video materials) should already have captions by default. If there are cases where this is not happening, please discuss with your Module Lead and ask for captions to be turned on. If it remains an issue or there is other

inaccessible content, please raise with the Student Disability and Accessibility forum so we can see what solutions we can get in place.

e) *Why do supervisors take PhD students when they actually have no intention to guide? Does it help with their promotions?*

- University response: Supervision of PGRs is a core part of the role for research-active academics and, as such, evidence of supportive and successful PGR supervision is one of many elements considered during the promotion process. Feedback from PGRs indicates that in the vast majority of cases Surrey's supervisors provide excellent support and guidance for their PGRs. In cases where the supervisor-supervisee relationship does not work so well, there are support mechanisms in place to help resolve issues. If you believe you are not receiving appropriate support, and if you do not feel you can raise this directly with your supervisor or with your co-supervisor, you can discuss your concerns with your School PGR Director. The Students' Union can also provide independent advice to support you.

f) *Why is Hazel Farm being closed down?*

- University response: When the University was granted planning permission to build Manor Park accommodation, one of the conditions of this planning permission was that when we reached 2000 beds Hazel Farm had to be decommissioned as student housing.

g) *Why is there no quantitative focus in research in the university - I see most to be on qualitative methods?*

- University response: This is a complex question! Broadly speaking you will find that the 40+ disciplines across the University utilise different methodologies. Remember that 'methods' are about 'how' you research not 'what' you research. And the 'how' differs from the natural sciences which are often quantitative in their approach (though not completely as their work can be highly theoretical eg nuclear physics), to the social sciences where a range of both quantitative and qualitative methods are used. In the life sciences (health, medical, psychological) there is probably a bias towards quantitative research although you'll find 'qual' alive and well in the professional areas associated with nursing, animal health, paramedic sciences. At the 'arts' end of humanities, there is almost a complete reliance on 'qual' eg interpretations of texts, poetry, music, and performance. The distribution of methods, along these lines, is fairly commonplace in most universities.

h) *Would it be worth enlisting the reps to survey trim colours once the idea gets approval?*

- University response: Yes, once we have confirmed that we are able to change the trim for BSc and MSc degrees we will consult with students.

i) *Would the changed colour of graduation robes be implemented (once approved) from this summer or from next year, because we graduate this year?*

- University response: Any changes will need to be subject to a regulation change and therefore will not take effect until the 25/26 academic year.