# Speak Week Insight Report – Semester Two 2024

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## Executive Summary

The University of Surrey Students' Union ran Speak Week in May 2024, providing students opportunities to provide feedback about their experiences at the University of Surrey. This report details feedback from the **521** answers given in the **222** responses to our core questions and by **23** focus group attendees.

The key priorities for students relating to University provisions remain the **affordability and accessibility of campus facilities**, and improvements to the **academic experience** at Surrey. Priorities for changes to Union provision include **nightlife, events, and venues**, and improved **visibility**. Suggested changes to areas of shared interest include **wellbeing support, communication**, and action to address the impact of the **cost of living crisis**.

## Introduction – Kiara Kataike, Vice-President Voice 23-24

"*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. 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.*"

# Speak Week May 2024 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 29 April – 3 May. 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.

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 541 change suggestions in answer to these questions from 222 responses.**

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 each Faculty, with a final focus group for first year 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 Voice Zone staff. **23 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.

# Core Questions Insight: University Changes

## Theme 1: Campus Life

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

### Campus Facilities

61 suggestions centred on non-catering campus facilities, primarily including requests for improvements to be made to the accessibility of campus buildings, and for new and improved communal spaces. Car parking provision was also highlighted as a key area for improvement, both in availability of spaces and on the cost of parking facilities. The quality and availability of study spaces was also identified as an area for change, as were a number of smaller quality of life improvements such as more charging points, water dispensers, and improvements to wi-fi on campus and in accommodation.

### Catering

55 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. A number of responses called again for the replacing of SImplyFresh or the reduction of prices. 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.

### Accommodation

25 responses called for change to University accommodation. This marked an increase from November 2023, despite a lower number of change suggestions gathered overall during this campaign compared to November. The majority of these responses called for reduced prices or increased affordable accommodation availability. In addition, the quality of University-provided accommodation and social and communal areas in accommodation blocks were also highlighted as an aspect of campus life which would benefit from improvements.

### Transport

Just 8 responses related directly to transport provision. Students who suggested changes to transport provision once again focused primarily on the reliability and regularity of bus services.

## Theme 2: Academic Experience

77 suggestions were received which related to the academic experience at Surrey. The primary recurring themes across this set of responses were **academic resources & support, University staffing, timetabling,** and **assessment & feedback.**

### Academic Resources & Support

32 suggestions related to the academic experience referenced academic resources and support. These suggestions included practical requests focused on improved provision of online resources including core texts and past papers, and improved integration of IT services and platforms such as MySurrey Attendance. 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 the option to take part in student-led buddy programmes or to connect with a mentor.

### University Staffing

20 responses highlighted concerns around staffing levels within smaller departments and the potential impact that redundancies may have on student access to academic support and wellbeing provision. Additionally, some 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.

### Timetabling

8 responses referred to timetabling. On the topic of lecture and seminar scheduling, it remains 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 reliability in how timetabling information is updated.

### Assessment & Feedback

17 responses related to assessment and feedback, with the majority of responses focused on exam organisation and the spread of assessment deadlines to improve student workloads. The prevailing requests on this topic is for exam timetables to be released earlier, and broader spacing of assessments during the exam period.

# Core Questions Insight: Union Changes

## Theme 1: Venues, Nightlife, & Events

92 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

56 responses called for a greater number or variety of events. Some students called for a greater variety of events, including more free events, cultural events, day-time events such as festival-style events, end-of-year celebration events, and overnight events. Students also asked for improved inclusivity of events, such as non-drinking events, events to connect postgraduate students, and events for those on other campuses.

### Nightlife

21 suggestions related to the Union's nightlife provision. Students called for more themed or genre-specific nights, expanded music choices, and alternative options to clubbing including alcohol-free nights.

### Venues

15 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 bookable student spaces within the building for student socialising or studying.

## Theme 2: Clubs & Societies

34 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 more opportunities to join groups, including cheaper memberships, showcasing group achievements, and more taster sessions. Students also suggested more incentives for inter-society collaboration, and to reduce the overall number of societies by merging similar groups together.

## Theme 3: Student Voice & Advocacy

29 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 the Union hold drop-ins with the Officer team to improve interaction between students and Sabbatical Officers.

## Theme 4: Visibility

18 suggestions were received which related to the **visibility of Union activity.**

### Visibility

Suggestions for change on this theme focused on both the prominence of the Union's presence on campus, calling for greater visibility on campus and increased physical advertising of events. Similarly, students called for improved promotion of the purpose and function of the Union, including Union achievements.

# Core Questions Insight: Shared Changes

A number of suggestions were received which related to areas of shared provision or priority between both the University and Students' Union.

## Theme 1: Support & Inclusivity

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

### Wellbeing Support

16 responses related primarily to the provision of mental health and wellbeing support. The main suggestions were increased resources and support, more mental health check-ins with students, and to incorporate mindfulness practices and education across the University community.

### Inclusivity

11 suggestions highlighted the need for improved inclusivity in areas of University life, primarily relating to improved training for students and staff, including workshops, guidance on best practice for supporting certain student groups, and opportunities to learn from the lived experience of staff and students. Students also mentioned the February intake of PGT students, and called for improvements to their induction to improve their sense of community and inclusion to the wider student body.

## Theme 2: Employability

23 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.

## Theme 3: Ethical Conduct & Sustainability

13 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, greater biodiversity on campus, and to improve waste segregation procedures, recycling, and reduced plastic consumption across campus.

## Theme 4: Cost of Living

19 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 relating to specific areas of student life have been categorised under those themes.

### 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 referenced increased availability of bursaries

and scholarships, and improved financial support rather than simply providing spending advice. Students also highlighted a desire for better awareness of the global context for some students who may be facing instability in their home countries which may impact their financial situation or the volatility of their home currency.

## Theme 5: Communication

10 number of responses were received which related to the University's effective **communication** with students.

### 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 including the Hive and OSCAR. Students also called for more effective and engaging communication within Schools and Departments to ensure that students knew about important changes, events, or updates.

# Focus Groups Insight

During Speak Week, focus groups were conducted with 23 students. Focus groups were conducted with students across all levels of study from each Faculty, and a session with first-year Undergraduate students. During the focus groups, a wide range of questions were asked to assess what improvements students wanted to see to the **academic experience** at Surrey, particularly focusing on **assessment and feedback**, factors influencing students' **sense of community and belonging** at university, and the wider **social experience**.

### Summary

Recommendations for improvements to the academic experience at Surrey varied across faculties. FASS students requested a more consistent quality of lecture recordings across modules, FEPS students wanted to see a reduction in the number of intensive days to prevent exhaustion, whilst FHMS students wanted lecture slides to be made available more in advance of lectures. Other findings included:

- Feedback for exams and assignments could be improved by ensuring its conciseness, relevance to each student, and availability in a timely manner.
- Students were more likely to have a 'sense of community' if they were on a course with a small cohort, or a member of a club or society.
- Students across all faculties mentioned that they would be more interested in attending more department and faculty-run events and trips.
- Some students thought that there were already enough events on campus, and that the real issue was getting the publicity and communications.
- Opinion over the importance of clubbing and nightlife was mixed; some students thought it was important, whilst for others it didn't feature as a priority in their university experience. Rubix was considered a good unique selling point for Surrey.
- The high cost of living was considered one of the two biggest barriers to students having a full social experience, with the other being a lack of free time.

### Overall Academic Experience

There was a consensus amongst **FASS students** that lecture recordings could be of **greater and more consistent quality.** Students said they valued the ability to re-watch lecturers as it 'embedded' their learning. One student also thought that modules needed **more consistency in terms of preparation,** reporting that some modules required a lot of pre-reading and preparation, and others less so.

Students also reported **inconsistency in the degree of prior understanding required for some modules**. One student, for example, reported that some lecturers expected students to perfectly recall topics covered two years ago; and in this instance, they felt that a brief recap lecture would help students refresh their knowledge.

The most common piece of feedback from **FEPS students** was regarding **the intensity of their timetables.** Two students said that long days with back-to-back lectures and labs were tiring and bad for knowledge retention; one in particular felt that they were so tired that they "weren't getting anything out of [lectures]". It was suggested that days filled with intensive lectures should be limited to 2-3 days per week to prevent burnout.

There was a shared feeling of **dissatisfaction with the level of communication and accountability from the faculty.** Some students complained of problems associated with miscommunication not being resolved in a timely manner, and changes being promised but never acted upon.

Responses from **FHMS students** varied more widely than the other two faculties. There was therefore no singular common theme amongst FHMS students. Suggestions for change included:

- Informal opportunities for students and lecturers to meet to discuss degree topics in an informal way.
- Making lecture slides available further in advance of lectures.
- Better encouragement of discussion boards on SurreyLearn.

Students also reported feeling a **disconnect between MEQ results and feedback received informally;** often the former was more positive than the latter. It was felt that MEQs were not a catch-all solution for feedback.

## *Assessment and Feedback*

The top suggestions from **FASS students** were:

- Making it clear that academic staff are willing and able to provide more detailed feedback when asked.
- Release marks and feedback from first assignments before students start writing second assignments.

A postgraduate researcher, with experience of marking assignments, made three suggestions:

- Make the feedback procedure clear from the first lecture.
- Better communicate and stipulate what is expected of the student to achieve certain marks.
- Make the feedback to students concise and relevant.

There was a sense amongst **FEPS students** that **feedback is often not received in good time.** Two students mentioned occasions where marks were provided only after students had chased for it. Another student felt that feedback for mid-module **assignments was not provided in time** to take on board for post-module assignments. Three students said they had not received qualitative feedback despite asking multiple times.

Suggestions from **FHMS students** included:

- More detailed feedback in the first instance, instead of having to arrange a further meeting.
- Greater consistency of expectations and application of marking criteria.
- Ensuring feedback is provided in good time (in particular, before second assignments and exams)

Students appreciated that it can be difficult getting a good balance between feedback that was timely and feedback that was detailed and constructive, but stated that an explanation of what was done well, and what could be done better, featuring links to examples in the assignment, would be very helpful.

The top issue for first-year undergraduates was also **receiving feedback in good time.** As for exams, students thought that **receiving a scanned copy of the exam paper** along with the grade and feedback would be useful.

## Sense of Community

Across each group, there were several common factors that were identified by participants as being significant contributors towards students' sense of community:

- Being part of a small cohort or class
- Working in small groups
- Module lecturers creating friendly, relaxed, and welcoming environments
- Joining and participating in a society or sports club

**The most frequently recurring factor impacting a sense of community was the size of a cohort or class.** Students from smaller intakes said they found it easier to make friends or connect with academic staff, especially if they met as a cohort regularly. For example, a Law student told us that their large cohort made it more difficult to approach lecturers and ask them for help. Conversely, a Music student from a comparatively smaller cohort found that students were willing to help each other, and that much of the department's academic staff had been at the university for a long time.

Students in the later stages of their degree said it was easier to get a sense of community **because class sizes tended to be smaller at that point.** Students who had completed foundation degrees mentioned that their class sizes during that degree were often smaller, and thus reported a greater sense of community. Postgraduate-research students often mentioned that they had a good sense of community because there were often only a small number of PGRs in the department. Some students also said that **seminars, labs, and group projects were better for building a sense of community** because of the smaller group sizes**.** These were environments where it was easier to meet new people and make connections.

Many students felt that their sense of community was influenced by both **the structure of certain modules** and on **the delivery style of the lecturer**. Students praised efforts to create friendly, relaxed, and welcoming environments in lectures and seminars. One student recalled a lecturer organising a post-exam picnic, which they thoroughly enjoyed. However, other students mentioned that getting a sense of community was a two-way process, and that students needed to be receptive and open for discussion at the same time.

Several students also mentioned that **extra-curricular activities, including being a member of a club or society, helped create a sense of community.** Students appreciated the opportunity to make new friends with like-minded people doing activities they all enjoy. Many said that it was easier to make friends in these activities. However, some mentioned that many club and society socials are based around drinking alcohol, which was not to everyone's interest and could alienate those who don't drink.

## Social Experience

There was no common theme in each focus group regarding the type of events students were most likely to attend, however, there were some broad themes across the groups. Some students thought that there were already enough events on campus, and that the real issue was getting the message out and letting people know what was happening.

Students from each faculty all mentioned that they would be **more likely to attend department and faculty-run events and trips.** For instance, some students from FASS said that they enjoyed a 'treasure hunt' organised by the Business School during Freshers' week, and the weekly movie nights organised by the Hive. FEPS students said they would attend inter-department competitions, such as between engineering schools. One student thought that the number of department-run events had reduced due to budget cuts, which disappointed them. Movie nights and quizzes were considered good events that were easy to attend; however, it was felt that these were events where you would go with people you already knew. Amongst PGR students, **there was the desire for PGR-specific events.** This could include tailored networking events for PGRs to discuss research; symposiums where PGRs can share research, social events to meet other postgrads (this could also include PGTs), and events to network with alumni.

Barriers to having a full social life whilst at University which were identified across all groups were the current **cost of living, and not having enough time.** The sharp rise in the cost of living was mentioned in every focus group. One student said it was difficult to have a full social experience when "everything is expensive at the moment". One student said that **having a full academic calendar meant there was no "breathing space" for other things**. Another said it was difficult to socialise without feeling guilty about not doing work. Other students said that time became a more prohibitive factor the further they got in their degree. PGR students said it was difficult to attend as many events as they would have liked due to having a full work week. **Location also influenced social engagement.** Some students said that living on Stag Hill made it easier to have a 'full' university experience. Conversely, students who lived at Hazel Farm said it was more 'isolating' when everything happened at Stag Hill or Manor Park. There was similar sentiment for students who lived off-campus (i.e., not in University spaces in Guildford) and those who commuted in.

# 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:

- Improved accessibility and quality of campus spaces and facilities
- Action to address the impact of the high cost-of-living on student finances
- Affordability and quality of student accommodation
- Improved academic resources, and integration of I.T. services
- A wider and more inclusive array of Union events
- Improved mental health support
- Greater career support pre- and post-graduation

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.