

# Speak Week 2019

From the 11<sup>th</sup> – 15<sup>th</sup> November, ARU Students' Union held **Speak Week**. A project designed to get right to the heart of what our students need. Conscious of how often we survey students, we decided to ask just one.

*“If you ran the university, what would you do?”*

## Overview

None of our promotional material contained any hints or suggestions of what to consider and so we hoped this would ensure that we gathered the genuine views of our students in London. This has enabled us to identify the key areas of work that we could do, together with ARU London, to improve the student experience significantly. This report is an overview of what we discovered during Speak Week and our recommendations for ARU London moving forwards.

## How we did it

Students were given the opportunity to answer the above question either through our website [angliastudent.com/speakweek](http://angliastudent.com/speakweek) or by writing it on a postcard and placing in one of the boxes outside the Students' Union. We ensured all responses were completely anonymous and completing the task was as accessible as possible to students. We sent all students an email, a text message, used social media (including ARU London's platforms), digital screens, posters, an area with the Speak Week collection box and cards, gave Course Representatives packs to hand out and also held a tea & coffee event to raise awareness to ensure all students had the opportunity to take part if they wanted to.



We received over 300 responses over the three London sites which a great number for us to undertake the qualitative analysis. The good number of responses gives us confidence in the common themes we have identified - and whilst we received a wide range of feedback, there were some clear underlying similarities. Once all responses had been entered into our system we coded each one individually and created sub-themes which then created wider key themes.

Students' key themes were;

**We would like additional activities**

**We need better access to learning**

**We want to be exceptional graduates**

**We need some extra support**

**We need the tools to operate in a digital world**

**We need to eat**

**We would like a comfortable and accessible campus**

## **Focus groups**

*"If you want us to do things digitally you need to give us the basic foundations and tools to actually do this. You can't expect us to do this without access to the internet."*

Once this was completed, we ran three focus groups with a number of Course Reps from both Farringdon and East India to gain further insight into these themes. We wanted to know why they thought these were so important and in what priority order they would place them in.

During the first discussion the group immediately responded with comments around lacking the digital tools and knowhow to comply with the most basic of tasks at ARU London.

*"Our group is told to go onto Kortext, check the VLE, but the wifi is not good enough to do this. We need to have a module on digital skills in our first term. Mature students particularly are really struggling. I have many come to me even asking how they get onto their emails."*

During a different group, one rep explained how she had to create a “How to use Kortext” video for her classmates, which was very well received. A different cohort were told by their lecturer that those who don’t engage with technology are the ones who will be on £14K a year – **they will be left behind.**

*“It’s a matter of choosing what we cannot live without and what we are willing to live with.”*

The second theme picked up was that of microwaves and a bigger space to eat.



*“We need a few microwaves. The eating rooms are too small, there is nowhere to wash your hands but the most important thing is a microwave.”*

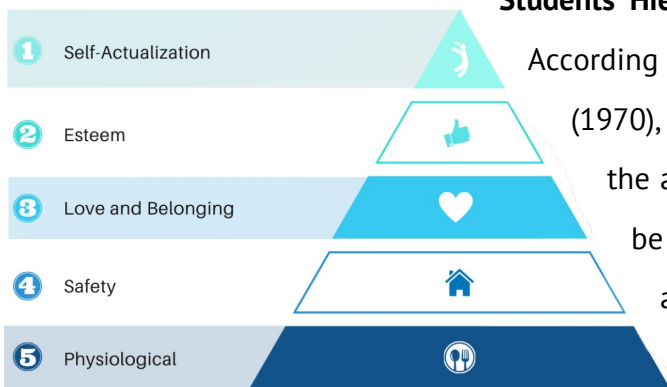
These were also the most commonly mentioned pieces of feedback we received during Speak Week. However, after more detailed group conversations, all three groups placed “We want to be exceptional graduates” as their number one priority, followed by a combination of;

- We need better access to learning
- We need the tools to operate in a digital world
- We need some extra support

The consensus across all three groups was in order to become an exceptional graduate, the above themes were equally necessary and something **they cannot live without**, but when pushed to choose, the remaining three (below) are what they are **willing to have to live with.**

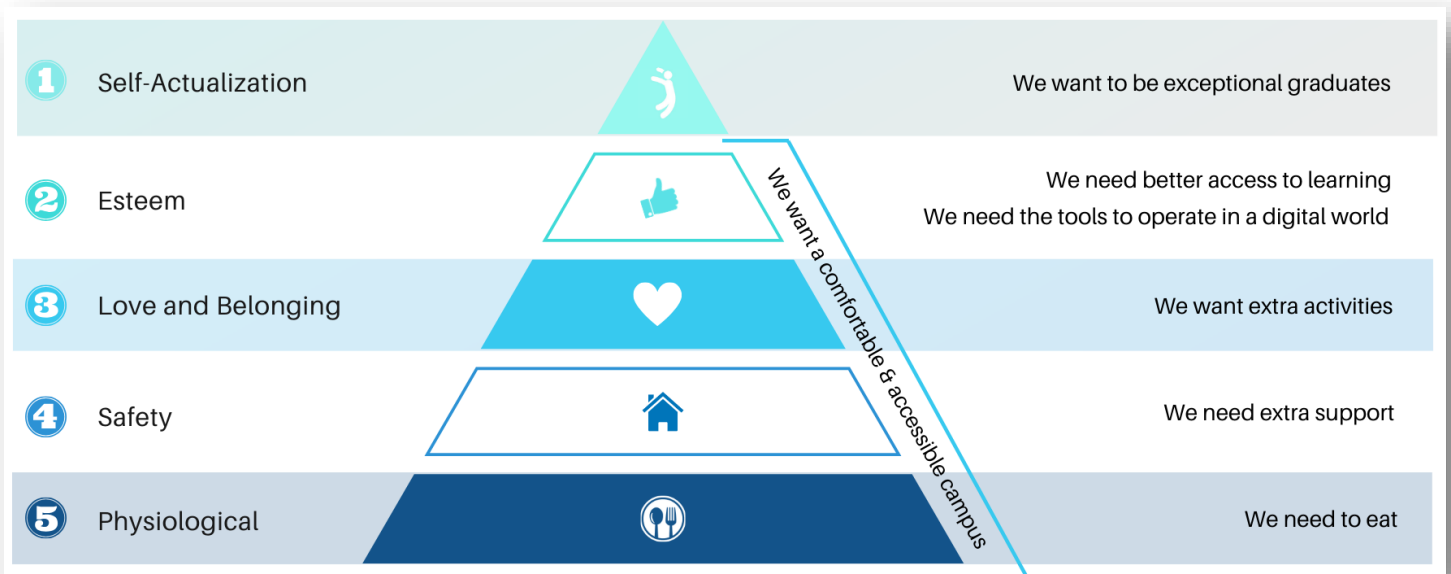
- We want additional activities
- We would like a comfortable and accessible campus
- We need to eat

## Students' Hierarchy of Needs



According to Abraham Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs (1970), self-actualization, strong motivation and the ability to 'be the best one can be', can only be reached if the lower tiers in the hierarchy are first satisfied.

Interestingly, when placing our Speak Week themes against the appropriate tier, they line up almost exactly in the order placed by our focus groups.



Responses within the theme “we want a comfortable and accessible campus” were the most common. This included comments around prayer rooms, cleanliness, opening hours, staff/student interaction and room temperature, which also spanned the bottom 4 tiers of the hierarchy.

The second most commonly submitted feedback was around having access to hot food, places to eat outside of the classroom, and cheaper on-campus food outlets. Whilst students feel that this lack of offering is **something they are expected to live with**, it is also the most

important tier of the hierarchy – without this, they will not be able to reach the top, the tiers they believe are the most important for their success, **those they cannot live without.**

## Detailed discussion and recommendations

### 1. We need to eat

*I have the right to hot food on campus; whether I bring in my own or purchase it from affordable on-site provisions*

#### Recommendation #1: Microwaves

Students wanting access to a microwave is all too familiar. As something that has been raised at most Student Staff Liaison Committees (SSLC's) over a number of years, students have been repeatedly told that this would never be an option due to health and safety risks. However, in reality it is common place for universities to provide these for their students and placing metal items such as forks or foil inside of them will not cause them to explode – in fact, the worst that would happen is the microwave might break.

In 2018 ARU Students' Union installed microwaves in both of their student spaces in Cambridge & Chelmsford and successfully campaigned for another at the Peterborough campus and the Young Street site. These have all been hugely popular with students.

*"I don't appreciate cold food and I'm tired of spending lunch money whenever I go to uni."*

**We recommend** that as part of a 6 month trial, ARU London provide at least two microwaves in both Farringdon and East India, along with clear health and safety signage and basic cleaning materials.

#### Recommendation #2: On-site food outlets

Whilst we are aware that an on-site food outlet was once provided at Farringdon and closed quickly due to inactivity, student numbers have since increased substantially. Students have

little time during their lunchbreaks to leave campus, especially as many need to charge their laptops/phones (as discussed below). In addition, the poor financial status of many of our students means somewhere affordable and accessible is necessary.

Students currently have nowhere to store their food at a temperature safe to eat without reheating. Whilst the barriers to having an external company provide food are clear – there are a number of other options worth considering, including hot food vending machines, partnerships with local food outlets or student-run businesses. The Ridgemount building includes a small, affordable café which is appreciated by the students there.

**We recommend** that ARU London invests in good quality hot food vending machines and subsidise the costs of food where possible whilst investigating a long term business-savvy solution for both Farringdon and East India, similar to that of Ridgemount.

## 2. We need extra support

*I feel able to access any additional academic or wellbeing support, training or guidance that I need to be successful*

### Recommendation #1: English Language Classes

Whilst there is an expectation (and requirement) that students are able to speak and use the English language at a level appropriate to Higher Education study, students are still struggling. Those who are not necessarily finding it as difficult are also keen to develop their language skills as much as possible – an attitude which should be encouraged, particularly for those looking at establishing their own businesses. Other students raised frustrations when their colleagues were unable to move at the same speed during lectures. ARU (Cambridge, Chelmsford & Peterborough) run the ARU Language Centre, offering a wide range of English language courses, qualifications and support aimed at those who are not quite at a high enough standard. In-session support sessions run for 10 weeks and include “Writing and reading skills, speaking and listening skills and language skills” - [aru.ac.uk/international/english-language-support](http://aru.ac.uk/international/english-language-support). A problem we encounter regularly

within our Advice Service is the lower level of English language skills which have therefore resulted in students getting caught up in academic offences. This could be due to their inability to write at a high enough standard, or to fully comprehend the rules & regulations.

*“More support from our tutors because most of us English is our 2nd, 3 or 4th language. We can understand when they are teaching but putting it in writing is very challenging.”*

**We recommend** that a smaller, simpler version of the ARU Language Centre is investigated and implemented.

### **Recommendation #2: Academic support**

A further widespread challenge a number of students are facing is a lack of additional academic support. The recent Wellbeing Unit is certainly a positive step, and this service could continue to develop in a number of interesting ways. Royal Holloway University run the CEDAS program, which runs workshops and lectures to help improve academic writing (with a separate support network for Academic English for International Students). This includes writing tutorials, “Editing and Proofreading” workshops and access to a proof reading scheme with external, approved proofreaders. They also provide appointments that are **available over skype** – something that would be very useful for our ARU London students when they are off campus [intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/students/study/academic-skills/cedas](https://intranet.royalholloway.ac.uk/students/study/academic-skills/cedas)

*“It might be beneficial for students to have some support classes in the academic areas they struggle with”*

**We recommend** that other avenues of support are explored (particularly available over skype), including proofreading opportunities and other academic-based workshops.

## **3. We want extra activities**

*I have opportunities to take part in additional course-based or interest-based activity*

### Recommendation #1: Course Trips

With the majority of our students working to a strict schedule, the opportunities to engage in extra-curricular activity is very limited. It is no secret the positive effects extra/co-curricular engagement has on retention, student satisfaction, attainment and graduate success so it's vital we do as much as we can to incorporate this into students' daily lives. As a Students' Union we are working hard to increase student-led events and projects for those able to step up into leadership positions, something we strive to improve on year on year. For the students unable to take on this extra responsibility due to other commitments, activities integrated into their courses is ideal. There has been overwhelmingly positive feedback from courses such as Law. Students feedback that they have gained huge amounts from the trips to courthouses, debates and academic staff support of the Law Society.

*"I would establish clubs like invest club, writing workshops, research workshops."*

**We recommend** that each course undertake at least one additional trip or activity, per cohort, per year.

## 4. We need the tools to operate in a digital world

*I can develop appropriate skills, and access equipment and facilities in order to study and work within a digital environment*

### Recommendation #1: Eduroam

Wifi issues are common place for both students and staff at ARU London. There is an expectation for students to have constant and good quality access to the internet for Turnitin, assessment submission, use of VLE, Kortext, student email, academic research, engaging in social media, and standing and voting in Students' Union elections. Currently the internet provisions are far from adequate. Students cannot comply with the basic expectations of their course requirements and staff are unable to access the appropriate networks or programs needed to do their jobs. As we move into an entirely digital world, the quality of the internet on campus is paramount.



*“Turning a university digital must have the facilities to give students the ability to study:  
Very good and strong signal/wifi”*

**We recommend** ARU London invest in joining Eduroam, an international roaming service, which provides easy and secure network access at institutions across the world for staff and students. For those visiting local libraries/universities (which our students are regularly encouraged to do due to the absence of on-site libraries), they will be able to automatically connect as “Eduroam provides a single solution that accommodates all the mobile connectivity requirements of an institution” [eduroam.org/about/institutions](http://eduroam.org/about/institutions).

### **Recommendation #2: Plugs**

Similarly to the need for quality wifi, students need power. They are on campus at least 6 hours a day and a fully charged laptop lasts anywhere between 1 – 6 hours of use. The majority of the content they are expected to engage with is via a computer or smart phone. Using electronic devices is especially important for students with disabilities or those who wish to use Kortext or take notes directly onto their devices. Members of academic staff have also commented on the disruption caused by the shared use of one or two plug sockets at the front of the classroom. This could be reduced substantially in classrooms with multiple sockets available at/close to desks.

*“Sockets to plug our PC would be very handy since we spend here more hours than a battery lasts.”*

**We recommend** ARU London invest in multiple charging points in communal areas and classrooms and desk-based sockets in classrooms.

### **Recommendation #3: Individual Log-ins**

Currently, there is minimal security protecting both ARU London computers, and the work and personal data of students. With no identification of recent users, it allows for anyone (staff, student or other) to access and potentially tamper with, or use the computers improperly. In addition to this, it also substantially increases the risk of plagiarism, loss of work and the sharing of personal data. Unless students are tech-savvy enough to understand

the importance of deleting their work from the computer's recycling bin, clearing their cache/cookies to avoid ARU's "single-sign on" automatically saving and using their log in details, plus remembering to log out of any emails, data storage or social media networks, there is a huge amount of risk. Students are required to know their username and password for eVision – their individual log in would be the same, with automatic access to their emails and other ARU programs without the need to repeatedly log in.

**We recommend** that ARU London investigate the costs and implementation of introducing individual student and staff log-ins.

#### **Recommendation #4: Digital Skills**

We now live and work in a digital world. Even for the most technologically adept on campus, keeping up with the new trends and developments is difficult. Our typical student is over 30, attending university for the first time (or after a very long break in study), with English as their second language. Whilst the basic technological responsibilities of a student may seem simple to many, the digital world is a daunting and incomprehensible place for others. Whilst digital skills classes have existed in the past with little uptake, we need to acknowledge that our methods of communication are not reaching even half of our students. Those who need the extra support struggle to even access the email telling them about the help.

*"The first time I touched a computer I was 24 years old"*

**We recommend** that a compulsory digital skills-based module is introduced to all first year students.

## **5. We need better access to learning**

*I can attend university and access the resources that I need, when I need them, to confidently achieve my academic goals*

### Recommendation #1: Hard Copies

Whilst benefits to e-books, online articles and Kortext are clear and are viewed positively by both staff and students, frustrations are repeatedly shared at their inability to access hard copy versions of their key texts. Whether this is due to styles of learning, undiagnosed reading difficulties, diagnosed disabilities (as the Disabled Students' Allowance no longer covers the costs of text books), or a lack of technical support/provisions outside of the University, students are in need of physical copies. Travelling to libraries further afield is a great option for a number of students, however our student parents and carers, those in employment or simply those less confident in travelling to new places, do not find this as accessible.

*"If I would run ARU I would make the library space bigger and would make sure students get access to all course book, borrow them for home"*

**We recommend** that ARU London invests in greater copies of key texts available for loaning to students. It should also be investigated into the feasibility of reserving library books online, taken back and forth from East India/Farringdon, similar to the Cambridge/Chelmsford library model. We also recommend to increase the number of students able to apply for physical copies of their key text books with disabilities or other extenuating circumstances that prevent the use of online resources.

### Recommendation #2: Inclusivity Fund

There are a wide range of costs associated with both being a student and living in/commuting to London. Whilst the Travel Bursary is helpful for students, it unfortunately doesn't come close to covering the wider costs. For those who need additional technology, hard copy text books, support in commuting costs, access to extra-curricular trips/events, this can become almost impossible for a number of our students and result in university becoming an extremely stressful place to come. A large number of our students are parents or have other caring responsibilities and are faced with substantial financial pressure. They would benefit considerably if they were able to access these extra opportunities and vital resources. We recognise all students have a different experience, and should ensure they get the best experience they can in these unique positions.

**We recommend** that ARU London creates an Inclusivity Fund, in partnership with the Students' Union, to allow students to apply for small pots of money on a case by case basis. The aim would be to remove barriers to participation and engagement with ARU London & Students' Union activity/requirements for any students who may struggle to find the additional costs in order to access their learning.

### **Recommendation #3: Longer opening hours**

Students who commute a considerable distance or for those who do not have access to technology/wifi/quality work spaces at home, require longer opening hours on campus to complete work, do research or take part in group work. Longer opening hours was a common suggestion that could be easily implemented, perhaps just in particular spaces to ensure it is secured.

*"I was removed from the building at 5:30pm in a not very nice way – we pay the same as Farringdon students; it isn't fair that our opening hours are shorter"*

**We recommend** that ARU London increase the hours students are able to study on campus and ensure this is effectively communicated to all students. Particularly at the East India site, we recommend longer opening hours are trialed over assignment periods.

## **6. We would like a comfortable & accessible campus**

*I am proud to study at ARU London, I feel comfortable on campus and I am a valued member of the community*

### **Recommendation #1: Multi-Faith Space**

ARU London is a proudly diverse community. Students rely on having a space where they can practice their faith no matter their sect, denomination, gender or belief. Whilst there are a number of off-campus sites a student *could* use – this is not practical given the nature of their timetables nor suitable for many female students or those of a particular sect. Whilst finding an available space is challenging, it is not impossible and overuse should not result in no use.

*“A prayer room for those that need it”*

**We recommend** that ARU London supports the creation of an inter-faith committee. This would include student/staff representation from a variety of faiths and cultures and would work towards finding solutions to the challenges (and opportunities) of being an inclusive, multi-faith university.

**We recommend** that a multi-faith space is found at both Farringdon & East India.

### **Recommendation #2: Social Space Revamp**

Particularly at our Farringdon site, space is hard to come by especially during lunch time. Students are required to eat in their classrooms or fight for a space in the common areas. During busy periods, the spaces can become somewhat of a pressure cooker, with an increase of student numbers also causing an increase of student-student altercations. The basement is a fantastic space with huge potential that could be somewhere students *choose* to use to switch off and take a break. With attractive places to sit and unwind, the installation of items such as pool tables for both sites would be simple, free and really add to the student experience. Similarly, the common room on the Ground Floor could easily be redesigned to make it a much nicer and more positive space for our students by an extension of the newly redesigned spaces surrounding the iCentre. As this space is outside both the Students’ Union and the Wellbeing Unit, it should reflect these values as a place of calm and support.

*“Change everything e.g. toilets, carpets, chairs, tables... and build a canteen”*

**We recommend** that ARU London invest in some new furniture, carpet, better lighting and plug sockets, of a similar design to East India/the front of house area in Farringdon, to make these spaces more desirable for students to use at break time or before/after for study purposes, relaxation, or extra/co-curricular events.

*“A pool table to play in a lunch time or other activities that people may like to get involved in.”*

**We recommend** that games such as pool and/or table football are installed on both sites.

## 7. We want to be exceptional graduates

*I will leave ARU as an experienced, work-ready and outstanding graduate*

### Recommendation #1: Work Experience

A huge positive of studying at ARU London is the ability for students to study for two-days a week, leaving the remainder of the week flexible for other commitments. One of the barriers to this structure of timetable is the lack of time for organized work experience/placements for students who want to take it that extra step to becoming an **exceptional graduate** – the theme our students placed as their number one priority. It is well-known within the business sector, the benefits of work experience for the student, the institution and the employer: [www.ncub.co.uk/placements-report/the-benefits-of-a-high-quality-placement.html](http://www.ncub.co.uk/placements-report/the-benefits-of-a-high-quality-placement.html). Finding a way to incorporate more practical work experience opportunities would be of huge value to ARU London students, improving both their academic abilities and their wider employability skills.

*“For law students, provide work placements or work experience. Set up a law clinic where legal advice could be given.”*

**We recommend** ARU London consider implementing an optional placement-based module in collaboration with the Employability Team.

### Recommendation #2: Student Review of Course Content

Closely linked to the desire for work experience, students are concerned that the course content is not as practical and relevant as it could be. Suggestions included more workshops, debates, and less theory, more practice.

*“If I ran ARU I would ask for teachers to do more PRACTICE... Practice develops more than learning. [For] anyone that makes business etc. they don't know how ...”*

**We recommend** in partnership with our Course Reps, lower performing modules should be reviewed and updated to incorporate more skills-based, practical aspects aimed at putting our graduates above others.

## Positive feedback

Amongst the areas of improvement our students also felt the need to, rightly, praise ARU London:

*“I would like to say many thanks for the venue chosen. Very nice place where we study. Continued library with a lot of stuff good for our assignments.”*

*“Pay the lecturers more they are great”*

*“Well done for your lovely services. We are all very delighted. Just would be nice to request many more events like this every week either Monday or Thursday.”*

This type of feedback is fantastic to receive and we hope this report leads to much more of it. Our students are grateful to be here and very grateful for the knowledge they gain.

## Summary

*“Don’t just want a degree, want something great... We don’t want something normal, we want something exceptional”*

Our students are so passionate about reaching their potential and becoming outstanding graduates ARU London can be proud of. It is both the Students’ Union and ARU London’s responsibility to do everything we can to ensure that each individual student journey is a positive and enlightening one. There are some very easy wins within these findings. For a small amount of money, some well thought-out planning and a wiliness to take some risks and try something new, ARU London could make some impactful changes.

We are looking forward to working with ARU London to agree the next steps to taking these recommendations forward.

Prepared by

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