



SU Living Rooms Insights Summary



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Introduction

The R&I team conducted two focus groups in both TB1 and TB2, to explore how the **Senate House Living Rooms** can be a more inclusive and welcoming space for a diverse range of students. The discussions involved students who were aware of the Living Rooms but actively chose not to use the space. Additionally, a focus group with three student staff was conducted, to supplement the findings from an observer standpoint. The research focused on understanding which aspects of the Living Rooms experience leads students to avoid the space, as well as identifying features students value in an ideal student space.

Key takeaways

Confusion about features

Students across both teaching blocks are **unsure what the Living Rooms offer, who it is for, and when it is open**. Most discover it by chance rather than through promotion.

Busy spaces

Overcrowding is the top reason students avoid the Living Rooms. This **disproportionately affects students with disabilities**, due to wait times for the lift and sensory overstimulation. Most students enjoy the space in theory, suggesting **expansion may be necessary to meet the demand**.

Diverse student needs

Students often choose other spaces due to **proximity to lectures or established study routines**, rather than because of dissatisfaction with the Living Rooms.

Underusing needed services

Some students feel **embarrassed using the swap shop** because of its visible location, limiting engagement, with some unaware of its purpose or how it works.

Valued features

Kitchen facilities, flexible seating, charging points, the swap shop, and entertainment **are seen as unique to the Living Rooms**.

Increasing inclusivity

Heavy doors, multiple Ucard scans, and narrow entrances create **barriers for wheelchair users**, pointing to a need for increased accessibility. Additionally, students suggested a 'silent zone' or 'quiet hour', to increase inclusivity for those with sensory sensitivities.

Student perspectives

Awareness and Understanding

Across both Teaching Blocks, students reported uncertainty about what the Living Rooms offer, who they are for, and how they should be used.

- Students with low awareness of the space's features had intentions of exploring the amenities upon learning about them, suggesting that **further promotion may increase engagement**.
- Students wanted **clearer information** about who can use the spaces and when, with some students across teaching blocks believing the space was only for staff or societies.
- Many students discovered the Living Rooms through exploring campus rather than through promotion, with many suggesting **stronger advertising and clearer signage is needed**. Most reported that the Living Rooms are advertised less than other university spaces.

“
The first time I went to the Living Rooms, I was wondering whether it was for staff or students.
”

“
I wasn't sure what the function of the Living Rooms was. Was it a study space, or a place to eat snacks, to read books?
”

Busy Spaces and Preferences

The Living Rooms' popularity demonstrates its value, but also makes it a barrier for some. High footfall makes it **difficult to find seating**, and the **wait for lift access amplifies this for students with limited time or mobility-related needs**.

- Students with sensory sensitivities find the noise and activity levels overstimulating, which can be a barrier to using the sensory room due to its location at the back of the space.
- **Overcrowding is the most commonly cited reason to avoid the space**, with students leaving even if they have intentions to stay. Expansion may be necessary to accommodate for the large number of students who enjoy the Living Rooms.
- Students suggested a **'quiet hour' or 'silent zones'** for students who struggle with overstimulation, to create an avenue for them to comfortably use the space.

“
Once, I left the Living Rooms because of how busy it is even though I came to stay there.
”

“
Senate is always packed... I never bother because I know I'm not getting a space here.
”

Diverse needs and convenience

Students choose spaces based on immediate needs, and the Living Rooms often compete against more convenient or purpose-specific alternatives.

- **Proximity to lectures** is a decisive factor for most students, with many foregoing extra comfort or amenities for a space they encounter first.
- Many students choose spaces which are **designed specifically for studying**, especially in TB2 when they have established routines for revision.
- The SU Loft is frequently preferred by participants, solely because it **eradicates the need to use the elevator during busy periods** of the year.

“
I stay near my own building where my lectures are.
”

“
It's not that it doesn't meet my needs, it is just more convenient to be somewhere else.
”

Social comfort

Some experience social barriers that make using the space feel intimidating, even if the overall consensus is that the Living Rooms are welcoming to everyone.

- Some students fear they will stand out when using the Living Rooms alone amongst established friendship groups.
- Many want to use the swap shop, however, its **visibility can make it uncomfortable**.
- Students feel a **designated space to eat food** brought from home can reduce embarrassment when eating around students who can afford to buy food on campus.
- Students suggested **events and activities as a way of making entry into the space less intimidating**, and build confidence in using the Living Rooms.

“
It's in a really public space to monitor students from taking too much (swap shop). It can be embarrassing, it's not private.
”

“
I would like a dining hall for people who make their own food to eat. Somewhere where I won't feel embarrassed eating my own homemade food.
”

Key features to keep

Students were asked what elements of the current Living Rooms they would want to see retained, and there was a strong consensus around many practical amenities offered.

- The **swap shop was valued as a unique resource** not available elsewhere on campus.
- **Water filters, kettles and microwaves are critical** for students, especially from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who bring their own food and need to heat their meals.
- The **projectors** are especially useful for society events and practicing presentations, however, students noted the HDMI cables are frequently lost.
- **Entertainment facilities** such as table tennis, pool table and board games are seen as distinctive features that set the Living Rooms apart from other campus spaces.
- The **general decor and atmosphere** was valued for its aesthetics and comfort.

“
Keep the donation box and swap shop, it's very useful for students.
”

“
The kitchen area is very important, we need microwaves and kettles, and coffee in the Living Rooms.
”

Possible additions

Students offered suggestions for features which would make the Living Rooms more welcoming to a wider range of students.

- **Diversify communication channels** about the Living Rooms features, such as through physical advertising about **unique amenities like table tennis or the swap shop**.
- The addition of **warm lighting** sources, **structured seating spaces** (e.g., booths), divisions between areas, and **areas with dim lighting or silent zones** for students to rest.
- An **online counter** of how many students are currently in the Living Rooms.
- International students feel that having flags the way the Global Lounge does, or cultural displays and elements can **make the space more welcoming**.
- A **convenience store** and **lockers**, for those who stay for long periods of time or commute.

“
A convenience store or stationery shop is useful. Lockers as well would make things easier.
”

“
It would be nice to have a 'Find a Space' type services to know how busy it is on that day.
”

Staff perspectives

Amenities central to daily use

The **kitchen facilities and comfortable seating** are the most valued and heavily used features, often drawing students who can't find equivalent provisions elsewhere on campus.

- **Microwaves and hot water** facilities are constantly used, with staff believing there are **not enough to meet the demand**. The kitchen facilities are particularly important to undergraduates who lack equivalent facilities elsewhere.
- The **big sofas are the most sought-after** spots, with students sending their friends ahead of time to claim them, as they are seen as unique on campus.
- **Charging ports built near seating are a key draw**, making certain areas significantly more popular than others.

“
It's very popular, people are always using the microwaves, boiling water, tea bags, milk.
”

“
The kitchens and the sofas are the most important, plugs for laptops and phones, there's nowhere else at uni with that.
”

The space serves diverse needs

Students use the Living Rooms for a wide range of activities simultaneously, and this **multi-purpose nature is one of the space's defining strengths**.

- Pool tables and table tennis are regularly used.
- Students who come to study increases through the day, with around 40-60 studying at once.
- Students enjoy resting in the Living Rooms, with around 8-10 students napping per shift.
- Societies and postgraduate students use the space for events, presentation practice, and film screenings via the projectors.
- The space **functions primarily as a place to decompress between lectures**.

“
I always see people napping, especially in the morning.
”

“
At lunch time, everyone is there to chill out and pass the time until their next lecture.
”

Swap shop

The **Swap Shop is genuinely valued**, particularly for food, but was reported to have low visibility and ineffective signage.

- Staff described that **many students do not know it exists or that items are free** to take.
- Students regularly ask staff whether items are free, indicating that the **current signage may be ineffective**.
- A staff member said the swap shop's location can be hard to find information about.
- The clothes and books available to swap are used, although, less frequently than for food.
- Suggestions include **grouping all the free resources together, with a large poster** explaining how everything operates.

“No one's going to read a little paragraph, it needs to be a big poster that says 'Take this for free'.”

“I was trying to find the Swap Shop for two years and didn't notice it. I even looked it up on the SU website and still couldn't find it.”

The Flexible Layout

Students value being able to **rearrange and adapt the Living Rooms to suit different group sizes** and activities, contrasting this favourably with more rigid spaces on campus.

- Students actively appreciate the ability to **move furniture to suit their activity**.
- The ability to create smaller, segmented spaces is seen as preferable to large open tables.
- Tables of 6 are suggested as used **mainly for groupwork**, instead of communal tables.
- The variety of space types and amenities mean **different needs can be met in one visit**.
- Rigidity is associated with other campus spaces (e.g. the library), making **flexibility a defining and valued characteristic** of the Living Rooms

“You can't move stuff around in the library, but you can rearrange the Living Rooms.”

“It's good when the things are quite multi-purpose and works in different parts of the space.”

Accessibility

Staff face recurring challenges around policing sensory room use and the physical inaccessibility of the space for some students.

- The sensory rooms are heavily in demand, but are **sometimes misused** as a meeting room, blocking access for students with sensory needs.
- The **doors to the Living Rooms are not automatic**, heavy, and can require multiple Ucard scans, **making the space inaccessible for wheelchair users when unaccompanied**.
- Planters placed near the entrance can **narrow the entry route**, adding to accessibility concerns.

“
There are emails from people with epilepsy saying they need the space but someone is in there on Zoom.
”

“
It's also made a bit inaccessible by where the planters are, you have to go through a really small space to get through it.
”

Observations of Usage

Staff were asked to estimate how many students would take part in different activities on average during a normal shift.



10-15 people do 'Fun' things



40-60 people are studying



8-10 people are relaxing