



Speak Week Report

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Introduction

This year, Hallam Students' Union split their flagship Welcome period into five themed weeks associated with various aspects of HSU experience. The fifth week, *Making Change*, focused marketing around elected Officer priorities, current campaigns, and hosted the HSU's second Speak Week campaign.

Between 14 and 17 October 2024, Students' Union staff, including HSU Officers, approached students across both City and Collegiate Campuses to gain their spontaneous, in-person feedback. Students were asked to complete a postcard which asked two questions about their course. Overall, 2212 postcards were collected and coded for data analysis which equates to a response rate of over 8%.

The findings from the Speak Week campaign will be presented at the Policy Forum, where they will inform the topics that the HSU Officers vote on to become the policies and priorities of the organisation. This research, therefore, will be central under the new democratic structure of the organisation.

Methodology

Much like the previous year's Speak Week campaign¹, members of staff from the Students' Union participated in outreach sessions where they would approach students across both City and Collegiate Campuses and ask them to fill in postcards which ask for simple demographic details such as College (BTE, HWLS, SSA), Type of student (Home or International), and Level of study (First-, Second-, Third-year

¹ For the full 2023 Speak Week Report-
<https://www.hallamstudentsunion.com/pageassets/union/publications/HSU-Speak-Week-Report-January-2024.pdf>

undergraduate. Postgraduate Taught and Postgraduate Research). The postcard also asks two questions:

- “What’s your favourite thing about your course?”
- “What would you change about your course?”

There would be six members of staff across 4 locations at City Campus (Sheaf, Owen Café, Adsetts Library, Charles Street) and 2 locations at Collegiate Campus (Heart of the Campus, Robert Winston Building). This would happen every morning/afternoon, Monday to Thursday.

Another six members of staff took part in ‘coding’ shifts, where they would theme the cards into one of six general categories (see Appendix B for the Coding Cheat Sheet):

- Course content
- Cohort
- Support
- Teaching
- Format
- Value

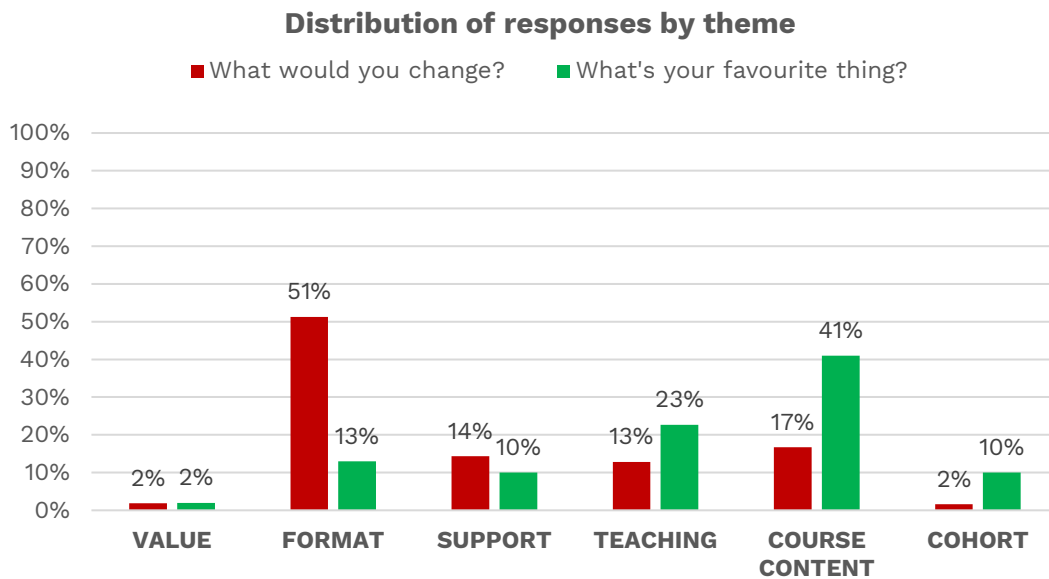
Due to the high volume of data we received, the themed cards were categorised again into subthemes based on the more specific qualitative detail on the cards. This allowed for us to see for any consistent trends in the data collected.

It is worth noting as well that there could be more than one code for a specific theme if a student mentioned said theme multiple times. For example, if a student said “I like my lecturers. I think the lectures are taught so well.”, that would qualify as two codes for the ‘Teaching’ theme.

Each card would assumedly have at least one *positive* code associated with the first question, and at least one *negative* code associated with the second question on the card.

General overview

Figure 1: Overall % for what would you change and what's your favourite thing about your course?:



The table below details by college, the percentage of change that students would like to see for each theme. Overall, each College has a similar breakdown, HWLS have slightly more negative format comments in comparison to the other colleges and as placement features in this theme this may be reflective of this College being more likely to have placement students.

Table 1: College breakdown for what would you **change** about your course?:

	BTE	HWLS	SSA
Course content	20%	16%	17%
Cohort	2%	2%	1%
Support	13%	14%	17%
Teaching	15%	12%	12%
Format	49%	54%	49%
Value	1%	1%	4%

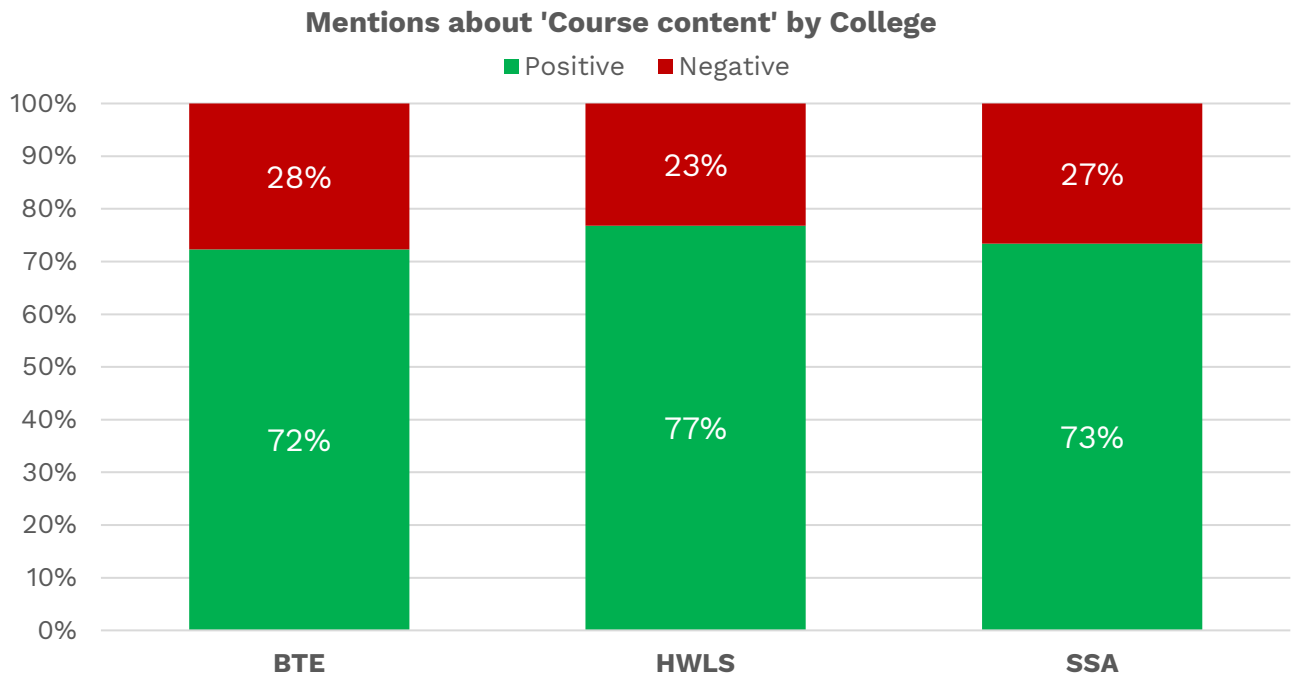
Course content

Course content was, as we can gather from Figure 1, the most common theme for students answering about their favourite thing on their course. Students within this category described their learning content as “fun”, “interesting” and

“knowledgeable”. Some students cited course-specific modules that they enjoyed such as engineering and health-related ones.

There were overwhelmingly more ‘Course content’ comments associated positively than negatively (see Figure 2 below for the distribution by college). The negative comments were thematically diverse, so they have been reorganised into subthemes.

Figure 2: Distribution of positive and negative ‘Course content’ mentions by College.



Relevance of content

The most common of the negatively themed comments centred around students questioning the relevance of what they were learning. Most of these comments mentioned their course content was not useful for their future career path, for understanding the subject matter, or for the assessments. Some comments even described their content as “pointless”. Others commented on what they are learning not being specialised enough, with students mostly from the College of BTE stating that they would like to see more specialised content for specific careers.

Learning style

Another portion of respondents commented about *how* they learned on their course. Students commented specifically about how they would want to see more practical content, based on experience. A few within this subtheme mentioned that their content was allegedly “boring” and found it “repetitive”.

Heavy workload

Other negative comments about ‘Course content’ consistently mentioned their workload being “too much” or that they were too heavily assessed on their course.

A few of these comments suggested scrapping group projects as a form of assessment due to the associated issues they bring.

Changes to Course Content

Few students commented too about changes that they would like to see specifically on their course. Most of these were second- and third-year students mentioning that they would like more flexibility over elective modules and freedom to choose what to study. A couple of comments from students on SSA courses also suggested that they would like to see a more diverse curriculum and culturally varied learning content.

Cohort

Although not as popular as the other themes, some students spoke about their cohort on their course. Like the 'Course content' theme, there were overwhelmingly more positive than negative associations with this theme (207 positive to 37 negative).

Those that were positive about their fellow course mates spoke about the friendly nature of their cohort and about the networking opportunities of working and learning alongside likeminded people.

Unengaged cohort

Some comments negatively centred around students expressing concern at their unengaged course mates. Some mentioned that the lack of interaction in classes made their learning experience "awkward". Others commented on how some course mates were "disrespectful" towards the lecturers, the cohort and the course generally, often being incredibly noisy and disruptive.

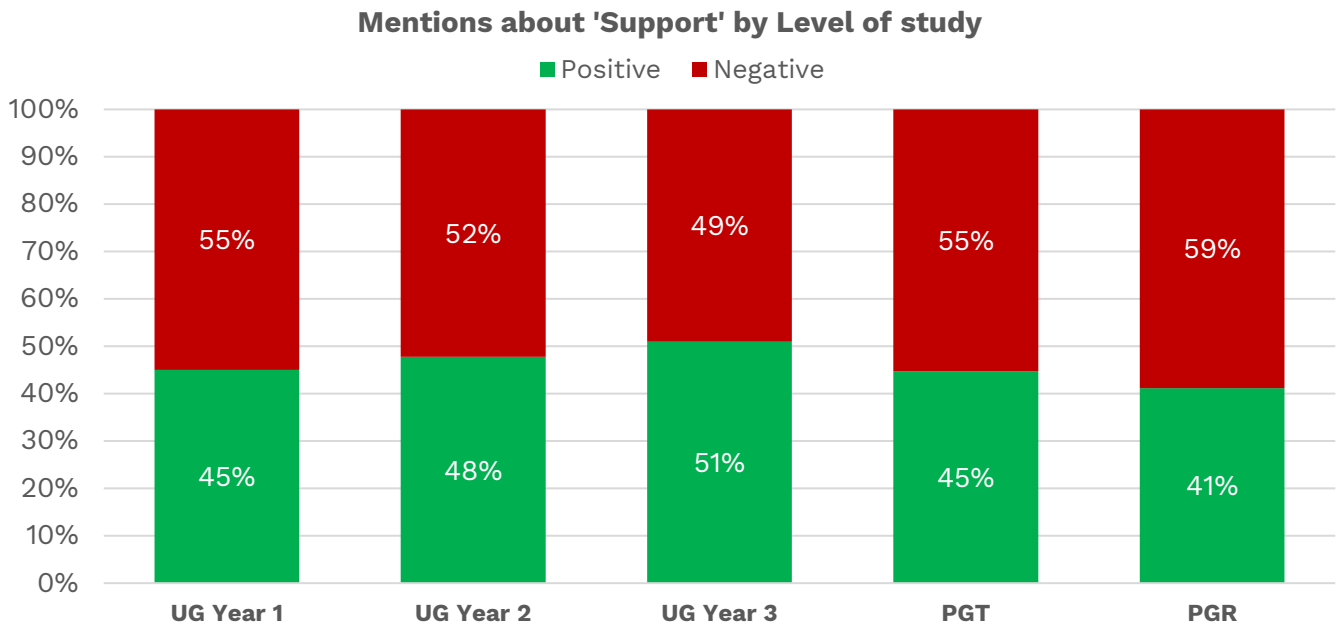
Changes to Cohort

The other comments within this theme centred around changes that students would like to see made. Some students commented on how their course was too big and that they would like to see it perhaps a bit smaller. Other comments spoke about how there is interest for more course-related extracurricular social activities.

Support

626 cards were coded under the theme of 'Support'. As one can see from Figure 3, despite the distribution of mentions varying a little across years of study, the proportions of negative comments within these year groups are quite consistent. Despite this, 'Support'-themed comments were quite broad as one can see in the subthemes below.

Figure 3: Distribution of positive and negative of 'Support' mentions by Level of study.



Assessment support

A huge portion of comments centred around how inconsistent assessment support feels for students. Many third-year students spoke about dissertation support, with some stating the need for “more information and guidance”. Some first- and second-year students also remarked that they wanted additional guidance on writing essays and referencing skills.

Placement support

A lot of comments surrounded students feeling inadequately supported about placements for their course. The majority of these came from the Colleges of SSA and HWLS. Some of these were specific, such as about wellbeing support whilst on placement or placement choice etc, whereas others were much more generic.

Technological support

A group of students remarked that there were issues with utilising the platforms for learning. Consistently a few students mentioned issues with Blackboard such as content being inaccessible or complicated to use. Other students across colleges spoke about the difficulties in utilising some of the course software or technology. A couple of students also remarked that the process of submitting work was complex and confusing, with 3 different websites required for submission.

Wellbeing support

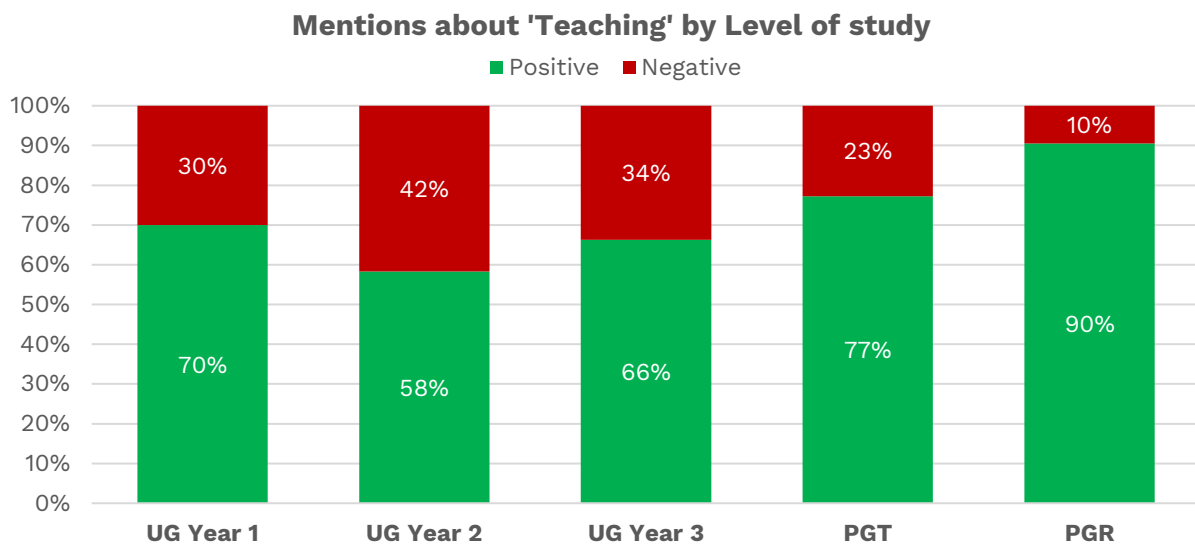
A significant number of students mentioned that the mental health and wellbeing support on their course could be better. Within this subtheme, students were specific, suggesting that “more regular check-ins would be nice” (second year Home student, HWLS). Another said they would like to see more information about how to access local mental health and wellbeing resources.

Accessibility

The rest of the comments for 'Support' fall into the subtheme of accessibility. A few of these comments specifically discussed the need for more provision for commuters, such as better car parking, or more car parking spaces, which was reported from both Collegiate and City campuses. Some spoke about accessibility issues for disabled students and wheelchair-using students, especially in learning spaces. Another couple of comments spoke about the need for more cultural awareness, such as not setting assignments around the times of religious holidays.

Teaching

Figure 4: Distribution of positive and negative comments by year of study for teaching:



The figure above provides a breakdown of the positive and negative comments from level of study. Interestingly Postgraduate students had more positive comments in relation to teaching in comparison to those in earlier years of study. Those in their 2nd year of teaching had the more negative comments.

As teaching was such a large theme, it has been split into further subthemes detailed below. Although students commented on what could be improved with teaching, a large amount commented on the positive aspects of teaching. With staff often being friendly and supportive towards students. Students praised those members of staff who were passionate about their subject area and delivered teaching in lots of different ways.

Quality of teaching

Firstly, respondents commented on the quality of teaching, with many feeling that it was 'unengaging' or 'boring'. Some stated they felt that information given in lectures and seminars was not clear enough, and sometimes teaching staff had

unrelated degrees for what they were teaching. It's worth noting that this theme was apparent across all the Colleges.

Pace/delivery of teaching

Similarly, students commented on the teaching pace/delivery at Hallam. Many commented on the need for lecturers and teaching staff to slow down, as they often didn't have time to take the information in or make notes. Additionally, a large number commented on how they would like teaching to be more interactive as often, staff just read of the PowerPoint slides. Again, these comments were applicable for all three Colleges.

Communication

Some students (although more prevalent in BTE) commented on the poor communication from teaching staff. They explained that some just don't communicate at all, or there is a poor response time to emails. Others commented on how they would like clearer communication around assessments, or there to be improvements around notifying students if staff were unable to attend lectures.

Staff attitude

A small number of respondents commented on the 'bad attitude' of some teaching staff. They found that teaching staff could be difficult to work with and a few commented-on technicians in SHEAF. One respondent commented on how teaching staff could often 'make my life hell' and were not receptive to feedback from students.

Although students commented on what could be improved with teaching, a large amount commented on the positive aspects of teaching. With staff often being friendly and supportive towards students. Students praised those members of staff who were passionate about their subject area and delivered teaching in lots of different ways.

Format

Format was the largest theme from Speak Week and has again been split into various sub themes. Proportion of negative and positive comments were relatively consistent across year of study.

Timetabling

Firstly, and by far the largest subtheme was timetabling issues which was apparent across all three Colleges. Although some comments centred on unfeasible options such as no 9am lectures or no scheduled teaching on a Monday, many did not. Many students commented on the large gaps that they often have between teaching which makes it difficult, especially if they are commuting. Similarly, some students commented on how their spread-out teaching made it difficult to work alongside their studies, which was leading to significant impact alongside the cost-of-living crisis.

Whilst some like the back-to-back timetabling as it condensed their week, others commented on how they had back-to-back lectures or seminars in different buildings, which made it unfeasible to be on time. Some also commented on how teaching without a break, or long lectures (such as those that are 3 or more) was intense and tiring.

Some students commented on evening lectures or teaching, particularly those after 5pm having a significant impact on their personal lives. For example, those who need to work in an evening, play sports or who have childcare responsibilities.

Assessment

Another large area students commented on across the Colleges was around assessments. Firstly, students felt as though they often had assessments too early into the year, without being given chance to fully learn or digest the topic.

They also commented on how they often had more than one deadline or assessment in a short period of time. This made it difficult to complete alongside other commitments such as place, work or childcare. Similarly, some stated they were not given enough time to do the assessments alongside other life commitments.

Some stated they would prefer to have more written coursework rather than being assessed via exams which they found more stressful.

Students also commented on the information that was provided around assessments, they often felt this was given too late or not in enough detail to be helpful.

More practical experience

Although like placement, students commented on how they would like to gain more practical experience or learning, for example lab sessions. Some students commented on how they found there was too much focus on the theory when it came to teaching and interspersing more practical learning would be beneficial.

Placement

Students who commented on placement stated they would like more opportunities for placements and to ensure that these were based in Sheffield, some had stated they have to travel for more than 2 hours to get to there.

Others who had managed to secure a placement stated they would like more information before hand as to what it would entail. They often felt there was a lack of communication from the placement team.

Another area related to placements centred on juggling them alongside other commitments. Some students explained how they had to try and fit their placement, studies and part time work in as the placement was unpaid. Similarly, some had commented on having more financial support whilst on placement as they struggled with it being unpaid.

Online teaching

Although some acknowledged online teaching was beneficial, for instance if there is only a 1 hour of teaching a day it made it easier to join online rather than commute, the consensus was against it.

Many found online teaching unengaging as lecturers just read of the slides, they preferred the face-to-face teaching. Particularly as they get to interact with their classmates.

A few commented on how it would be beneficial to have the lectures recorded when they are delivered face to face, this would enable students to go back over the topic, or if they found the pace too quick, they could revisit in their own time.

Group work

Students (the majority from BTE) commented on how they did not like group work, especially if it was forming part of an assignment. Whilst they acknowledged it was important to gain experience working with others, they felt it was unfair to have their grades relying on other classmates. Some also commented on how they found the amount of group work inaccessible.

Facilities

Within this theme students mostly commented on teaching facilities not being adequate, for example, lecture rooms being too hot, with not enough or uncomfortable seating. A few had written the lecture hall in EMB was not adequate.

Some had commented on how there were not enough table and chairs in communal spaces, which was an issue especially as a large number had gaps in between their lectures so needed places to study or wait.

Another area some commented on was parking on or near the University, particularly as a large number commute. They explained how there often enough parking, or it is too expensive.

Unorganised course

Comments under this theme centred on how their course generally felt unorganised, for example, there can often be last minute teaching changes with little communication. Some commented on how there was inconsistent teachers for certain modules, and they could change weekly.

Some had commented on the recent restructure, and how this had happened in their final year which left them feeling like no-one knew what was going on.

Module allocation

Across all Colleges students commented on how they would like more opportunities to choose the modules they study, with more information given on what the module entails.

Some students commented on how they felt they had too many modules on the go at one time which often led to an unmanageable workload.

Value

‘Value’ was the theme with the lowest count of associated themed cards. Despite this, the issues and comments were consistent enough that they could be organised into subthemes.

Expensive learning

Within this theme, a few students spoke about their course not being worth the money. 4 students from SSA specifically mentioned how expensive the materials were for their arts courses. Another student from SSA specifically suggested a “higher bursary for PGCE students”.

Worthwhile opportunities and experiences

Some students within this theme wanted to praise the worthwhile experiences and opportunities that they had enjoyed as being a part of their course. A couple of BTE students also mentioned the experience of working with diverse cultures had been fulfilling.

Insufficient timings

A few spoke about how their contact hours were insufficient for the price of course costs. One student described the number of sessions as “pointless” and another argued that “sometimes it feels like a waste” when discussing the length of time for seminars.

Appendix A- Respondent Demographic Profile

Year of study	Count	%
UG Year 1	619	31%
UG Year 2	448	23%
UG Year 3	400	20%
PGR	49	2%
PGT	374	19%
Foundation	58	3%
Degree Apprentice	10	1%

Fee status	Count	%
Home	1536	83%
International	317	17%

College	Count	%
BTE	650	34%
HWLS	695	36%
SSA	561	29%

Appendix B- Coding ‘Cheat Sheet’

Speak Week Cheat Sheet

For this year’s Speak Week, we are asking students to share their insights into the best and worst parts of **their course**.

Coding is the process of categorising research data such as comments into different themes. This is an important process as it allows for people to experience exactly what students are saying, and it allows for the data to be organised ahead of analysis.

The topics are designed to be broad enough for easy coding and statistical analysis.

<p style="text-align: center;">Course content</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Topics, themes, discussions - Reading lists 	<p style="text-align: center;">Teaching staff</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Lecturer, teachers and communication with them - Seminar and lecture delivery
<p style="text-align: center;">Cohort</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Fellow students on their course - Lead Rep, Course Rep - Academic societies 	<p style="text-align: center;">Format</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Timetabling - Teaching space - Placement logistics - How are they assessed?
<p style="text-align: center;">Support</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Course resources - Career/future support - Support while on placement - Mental health/wellbeing, disabled support 	<p style="text-align: center;">Value</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Emotionally fulfilled? - Waste of money? - It is (not) worth it.

When coding, please signify also whether the topic is spoken about in a **positive** or **negative** way.

If a comment is actively appraising, or uses actively positive language, then it should be categorised as **positive**.

If a comment is actively negative or uses uncertain/neutral language or sentiment, then it must be categorised as **negative**.

For example,

“I don’t know whether my course is worth the money I’m paying” **value**

“My course is full of really friendly students; they are the best part” **cohort**

“The lectures are SO boring, but I love the topics so much” **teaching, course content**