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## **Risk control** **Freshers' Week**



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# Freshers' Week

## Introduction

Freshers' Week is a crucial period in the academic calendar, providing new students with opportunities to engage with university life, establish social connections, and familiarise themselves with campus resources. While these activities foster a welcoming environment, they also present significant operational and safety challenges that require careful planning and oversight. Universities have a responsibility to ensure that Freshers' Week is safe, accessible, and compliant with legal standards, including the requirements of Martyn's Law<sup>1</sup>, which mandates security protocols for publicly accessible venues.

This report provides a range of considerations for managing Freshers' Week effectively, covering risk assessments, emergency preparedness, student welfare, and inclusivity initiatives. Additionally, it outlines the role of the Student Union, whose collaboration with university leadership is critical in ensuring student-led activities align with compliance and security protocols. The recommendations presented here are designed to support university staff in delivering a structured, well-managed Freshers' Week, balancing student engagement with institutional responsibility.

## Risk Assessment & Compliance

Freshers' Week presents unique challenges due to the high volume of attendees, late-night events, and varied social activities. Among the primary concerns is crowd control, as large-scale gatherings can lead to overcrowding, restricted access, and difficulties in emergency evacuations. Without clear safety protocols in place, the risk of accidents or delays in incident response increases significantly.

Personal safety is another critical aspect, particularly in relation to alcohol consumption and drink spiking. Many students participate in social drinking, which, in excess, can impair judgment and increase vulnerability. Reports of drink spiking incidents have risen, making it essential for universities to educate students on the risks and preventative measures available.

Freshers' Week presents unique safety challenges, particularly in social settings where students may feel vulnerable or uncomfortable. Universities should actively promote the Ask for Angela initiative<sup>2</sup>, a discreet safety scheme designed to assist individuals who feel unsafe in public venues. This initiative allows students to approach trained staff at participating locations and request help using the phrase "Ask for Angela." Staff are trained to respond appropriately, whether by providing a safe space, arranging transport, or intervening in a concerning situation.

Universities should collaborate with local bars, clubs, and student venues to ensure widespread adoption of the scheme, integrating it into Freshers' Week safety briefings and awareness campaigns. Additionally, security teams and student volunteers should receive training on recognising and responding to Ask for Angela requests, reinforcing a culture of safety and support across campus.

Mental health and well-being must also be considered, as some students struggle with stress, homesickness, and pressure to fit in. The transition to university life can be overwhelming, and without adequate support systems, students may experience anxiety or isolation. Counselling services, peer support programs, and proactive outreach initiatives can help mitigate these concerns.

Compliance with Martyn's Law<sup>1</sup> requires universities to integrate security protocols that protect students during events. Institutions must conduct risk assessments for Freshers' Week gatherings, categorising venues and activities based on attendance levels and potential security threats. Emergency preparedness must be embedded in event planning, including evacuation procedures, incident response training, and security staff deployment. Collaboration with enforcement authorities ensures effective safety measures while maintaining compliance with legislation.

## Security Measures & Event Safeguards

To ensure student safety during Freshers' Week, universities must implement structured security protocols that address potential risks<sup>3,4</sup>. Managing large crowds requires strategic planning, including controlled access points. Ticketing or registration systems should be used for major events, allowing universities to monitor attendance and prevent overcrowding. In addition, security personnel should be stationed at venues with high foot traffic, such as Student Union events, bars, and nightclubs. Their presence serves as a deterrent for disruptive behaviour and enables rapid incident response if required.

Emergency preparedness is a crucial element of event safety. All Freshers' Week activities should include clear evacuation plans, prominently displayed emergency exit routes, and designated first aid stations. Staff and volunteers involved in event management must be trained in emergency procedures, ensuring they can respond effectively to security concerns, medical emergencies, and other unforeseen incidents. Universities should promote awareness campaigns that educate students on security resources available to them, such as helplines, emergency contact information, and the locations of on-campus security personnel.

Raising awareness about personal security is also essential. Students should be encouraged to adopt safety measures such as traveling in groups at night and monitoring their drinks at social events to prevent spiking. Universities can distribute informational materials and conduct safety briefings that cover key risk factors, including responsible alcohol consumption and how to seek assistance in unsafe situations.

## Public Liability Insurance

Public Liability (PL) insurance is a fundamental requirement for Student Unions organising Freshers' Week activities. With large numbers of students attending social events, there is a risk of personal injury, property damage, and third-party claims. Ensuring comprehensive insurance coverage safeguards the Student Union and university from financial and legal repercussions should an incident occur.

PL insurance policies typically provide coverage for accidents sustained during Student Union-organised events, ensuring that affected individuals receive appropriate compensation. The insurance also extends to third-party claims, protecting against legal actions from attendees, contractors, or service providers. Damage to university property should also be covered under standard policies and may extend to rented venues.

To mitigate liability risks, universities must conduct regular assessments, evaluating the potential hazards associated with Freshers' Week activities. The full range of activities should be discussed prior to the events with the broker to ensure that the policy does provide suitable cover.

Reviewing insurance policies annually ensures they remain aligned with the scale and nature of events being held.

## Student Well-being Considerations

### — Creating an Inclusive Freshers' Week

Freshers' Week should be designed to ensure that every student feels welcome, valued, and included, regardless of their background, personal preferences, or neurodivergent traits. Students who identify as neurodivergent—such as those with autism, ADHD, dyslexia, dyspraxia, and sensory processing differences—often face challenges in navigating new environments and social expectations. For them, Freshers' Week can be particularly overwhelming, with large crowds, unpredictable schedules, and heightened sensory inputs.

To foster an inclusive atmosphere, universities must be intentional in structuring events that cater to diverse needs. This includes offering multiple engagement formats, ensuring that students who prefer quieter, structured interactions have options beyond loud social events.

Providing students with advance information on event schedules, venue layouts, and expected sensory stimuli can help neurodivergent individuals prepare mentally and reduce anxiety about attending. Universities should also promote accessible communication, ensuring that materials use clear, straightforward language and visual guides to support students who process information differently.

Additionally, student societies and advocacy groups should be involved in planning Freshers' Week activities, ensuring neurodivergent voices are heard. Peer support groups can help neurodivergent students connect with like-minded individuals in spaces designed for comfort and familiarity, strengthening their sense of belonging from the outset.

### — Sensory Considerations

For students with sensory sensitivities, overcrowding, loud music, bright lights, and chaotic environments can trigger discomfort and stress. Many Freshers' Week events, such as club nights and large student fairs, are designed to be energetic and highly stimulating. While these events may appeal to many students, they can alienate those who experience sensory overload or struggle with unstructured social engagement.

Universities must proactively design sensory-friendly spaces, where students can step away from overstimulating environments and regain a sense of calm. These areas should be quiet, dimly lit, and free from excessive background noise, providing students with a comfortable retreat. Additionally, venues should provide advance notice of sensory factors—such as flashing lights or loud music—so students can make informed decisions about attending.

To accommodate neurodivergent students at large events, universities can introduce structured entry times or reserved quiet hours, allowing individuals to navigate Freshers' Week activities at a pace that suits them. Providing noise-cancelling headphones, weighted blankets, or sensory-friendly seating areas can further enhance accessibility.

### — Social & Communication Support

Many neurodivergent students experience difficulty with social communication, interpreting body language, and engaging in informal conversation. Freshers' Week heavily relies on social interactions, with students meeting new peers, forming friendships, and navigating unfamiliar group dynamics. For some, unstructured social settings can be intimidating, leading to avoidance behaviours or feelings of isolation.

Universities can support neurodivergent students by implementing peer mentoring programs, where experienced students guide newcomers through social interactions, offering reassurance and structured opportunities for engagement. Additionally, small-group networking events

with clear conversation prompts can help students ease into interactions without feeling pressured to engage in high-energy socialisation.

For social events such as meet-and-greets, universities can create alternative seating arrangements, ensuring there are dedicated spaces for quiet conversation and one-on-one interaction rather than only large group discussions. Digital communication tools, such as student forums or themed online communities, can also serve as alternative engagement channels, allowing students to build connections before meeting in person.

#### — **Accessibility & Event Adjustments**

Beyond neurodivergence, universities must ensure Freshers' Week is physically, socially, and financially accessible to all students. Many university events focus on nightlife, alcohol consumption, and high-energy activities, but not all students feel comfortable or included in these settings. Universities should ensure there are multiple Freshers' Week pathways, catering to students who prefer non-drinking, smaller-group, or academic-focused activities.

Providing virtual meetups, smaller-scale gatherings, or daytime wellness activities ensures broader engagement. Universities should offer clear, accessible schedules in multiple formats, including visual timetables, video guides, and printable resources, ensuring students with disabilities or neurodivergent traits can easily navigate events.

Physical accessibility must also be prioritised. Event venues should be wheelchair-accessible, with adjusted seating, ramps, and transport accommodations. Clear signage, accessible pathways, and venues with adequate restroom facilities should be standard across all Freshers' Week locations.

#### — **Staff Training & Awareness**

Universities must ensure that event organisers, faculty, and student volunteers receive comprehensive neurodiversity training to foster a welcoming environment for all students. Many neurodivergent individuals face misunderstandings and biases when navigating social situations, often misinterpreted as being disinterested, uncooperative, or socially withdrawn. Training should focus on how to recognise signs of sensory overload, how to provide support, and how to communicate effectively with neurodivergent individuals.

Staff should be equipped to offer reasonable adjustments, including alternative participation methods, quiet spaces, and structured event formats. Training modules should incorporate real-world scenarios, helping staff identify barriers faced by neurodivergent students and implement solutions proactively.

#### — **Role of the Student Union in Managing Freshers' Week**

The Student Union plays a crucial role in managing Freshers' Week, from event planning to student welfare initiatives. As the primary student-led body, the SU is responsible for ensuring Freshers' Week events reflect the diverse needs of the student population. Their duties extend beyond organising social events; they also advocate for student well-being, mental health, financial accessibility, and inclusivity measures.

The SU ensures Freshers' Week provides alternative events alongside traditional social activities, catering to students who may feel uncomfortable in nightclub settings or drinking culture. They also coordinate student welfare services, offering mental health support, financial guidance, and security initiatives throughout Freshers' Week.

Collaboration between universities and the SU is essential for delivering a well-managed event. Universities should offer financial resources, strategic support, and policy oversight, ensuring student-led initiatives align with broader institutional compliance frameworks. Additionally, both parties should work together to develop risk assessments, emergency preparedness strategies, and student safety campaigns, helping to make Freshers' Week as secure and accessible as possible.

#### — **Alternative Freshers' Week Activities**

In recent years, universities have expanded Freshers' Week offerings beyond traditional nightclub events, recognising that not all students wish to participate in drinking cultures. Many institutions now host alcohol-free alternatives, ensuring social engagement remains accessible to all.

Examples of alternative Freshers' Week activities include board game nights, where students can engage in friendly competition in a relaxed setting, and escape rooms, which encourage teamwork and problem-solving without the pressure of high-energy socialising. Outdoor activities such as picnics, hiking trips, and mindfulness sessions allow students to connect with peers in calmer environments. Creative workshops, book clubs, and society taster sessions further encourage participation across a wide range of interests.

Universities should proactively advertise non-drinking events alongside traditional Freshers' Week options, ensuring students feel they have equitable choices in how they engage socially.

### **Compliance & Legal Considerations**

Ensuring compliance with legal frameworks is a fundamental responsibility for universities when organising Freshers' Week. Institutions must follow Martyn's Law<sup>1</sup>,

which mandates protective security measures for venues with 200 people and over attending, including student events. Compliance ensures risk mitigation, liability reduction, and a structured emergency response framework, enhancing the overall safety of Freshers' Week activities.

Additionally, universities must adhere to national and local authority regulations regarding venue capacity, crowd management, and health and safety standards. Large-scale student events must undergo comprehensive risk assessments, ensuring fire safety protocols, medical support provisions, and emergency evacuation strategies are integrated into event planning.

Collaboration with emergency services and venue security operators is crucial for compliance. Establishing direct communication channels allows institutions to coordinate safety response efforts efficiently, ensuring rapid intervention in case of emergencies. Universities and Student Unions should also ensure public liability insurance coverage extends to student-organised events, safeguarding against potential legal claims arising from injury or property damage.

## Recommendations for Implementation

For effective Freshers' Week planning, universities should adopt structured implementation strategies that align with compliance requirements and student welfare objectives. Below are key recommendations:

### — Establish a University Safety Committee

Universities should create a Freshers' Week Safety Committee, comprising representatives from student affairs, campus security, emergency services, and the Student Union. This committee should oversee risk assessments, compliance verification, and safety training, ensuring institution-wide coordination and accountability.

### — Formalised Risk Assessment Process

Risk assessments should be integrated into all major Freshers' Week activities, with security teams conducting pre-event evaluations. This process should include venue inspections, emergency protocol reviews, and capacity monitoring, ensuring compliance with Martyn's Law<sup>1</sup> and local safety regulations.

### — Student & Staff Safety Training

Universities must ensure event organisers, Student Union representatives, and security staff receive training in emergency response, crowd control, and crisis intervention. This training should include situational awareness exercises, equipping staff with decision-making skills in high-pressure environments.

### — Informing Local Authorities for Large Events

For large student events, even those not open to the public, universities should notify the local authority and emergency services to facilitate external coordination in case of incidents<sup>5</sup>. This ensures crowd control measures, emergency response planning, and public safety concerns are addressed proactively. Large-scale events should also be registered with local licensing authorities, ensuring compliance with venue regulations, noise restrictions, and operational safety codes.

### — Strengthening Student Welfare & Inclusivity

Freshers' Week planning should prioritise mental health support, accessibility, and inclusivity initiatives. Universities must allocate designated welfare officers, ensuring students facing personal challenges or safety concerns can access appropriate support services. Additionally, institutions should implement sensory-friendly zones for neurodivergent students, providing quiet spaces and structured engagement opportunities.

### — Enhancing Safety Communication Channels

Universities should maintain clear safety communication channels, ensuring students have access to emergency contacts, security alerts, and incident reporting mechanisms. This includes:

- Publishing Freshers' Week safety guides, accessible both digitally and in print
- Providing a 24-hour student safety helpline, staffed by trained personnel
- Establishing designated security checkpoints at major event venues

## Conclusion

Freshers' Week is a high-impact period requiring structured oversight, risk management, and student welfare strategies to ensure a safe and engaging experience for all attendees. Universities must adopt a proactive approach by implementing compliance-driven security frameworks, collaborating with local authorities, and integrating inclusive event planning.

Compliance with Martyn's Law<sup>1</sup> and local safety regulations ensures universities fulfil their duty of care while minimising liabilities associated with large-scale student gatherings. Strengthening student welfare initiatives, including mental health support, alternative Freshers' Week options, and accessibility provisions, will contribute to a positive and inclusive environment.

## References

1. Martyn's Law – The Terrorism (Protection of Premises) Act 2025 - <https://homeofficemedia.blog.gov.uk/2025/04/03/martyns-law-factsheet/>
2. Ask for Angela - <https://askforangela.co.uk/>
3. Event Safety – HSE - <https://www.hse.gov.uk/event-safety/>
4. The Purple Guide - <https://www.thepurpleguide.co.uk/>
5. Safety Advisory Group – HSE - <https://www.hse.gov.uk/event-safety/safety-advisory-groups.htm>

## Further information

For access to further RMP Resources you may find helpful in reducing your organisation's cost of risk, please access the RMP Resources or RMP Articles pages on our website. To join the debate follow us on our LinkedIn page.

## Get in touch

For more information, please contact your RMP risk control consultant or account director.

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