

Making Students' Union Societies Accessible: Sensory-Friendly Event Ideas

Many students prefer events that are calmer, quieter, or more predictable, especially those who experience sensory overload, anxiety, or fatigue. Sensory-friendly events focus on low stimulation, clear structure, and flexible participation, making them welcoming for a wide range of access needs. The list below offers ideas that societies can use when planning alternatives to loud or high-energy socials. These events work well because they reduce sensory demands, allow students to engage at their own pace, and create an environment where stepping back, taking breaks, or simply observing is completely normal.

- **Board game nights**

- Board game nights are naturally calm and structured due to the nature of board games. Students can choose quieter games, take breaks between rounds, or simply observe without pressure, making the sensory load predictable and low but still allowing them to engage with their peers and make friends. Some good board games for this include Catan, Ticket to Ride, Carcassonne, Azul, and Wingspan.

- **Craft or art sessions**

- Craft activities offer gentle, hands-on engagement in a quiet environment (although this can depend on the craft). Students can focus on a single task, regulate sensory input through tactile materials, and participate without needing constant conversation, which helps students who want to be involved but might be shy or anxious about speaking. Some quick and easy crafting sessions could be watercolour painting, collage making, origami, clay modelling, embroidery or badge-making.

- **Quiet coffee socials**

- These types of socials keep noise levels low and the conversation can be optional. It allows students to sit where they feel comfortable, step out easily, and engage at their own pace without bright lights or loud music. This sort of social does not have to only be about coffee, some societies have also had tea tasting sessions, hot chocolate socials or, "Bring Your Own Book" café meet-ups.

- **Nature or City walks**

- Nature based activities are usually quiet and allow students space to engage at their own pace. They can chat with others, or simply join and enjoy being outdoors. These events could include a campus nature trail walk, botanical garden visit, beach walk, bird-spotting stroll and can be a great way for people to learn more about the local area. For a city-based campus, consider highlighting green spaces and parks around town which your students might not be aware of!

- **Book club / reading hour**
 - Book-based events are quiet, predictable, and low-pressure. Students can listen, read, or contribute briefly, with no need for fast responses or high social energy such as during a silent reading hour. The book club can also be themed based on book genres (fantasy, sci-fi) and the different formats of books such as audio books allows this to be a very accessible option for many students.
- **Lego building / model making**
 - Building activities offer tactile, focused engagement in a calm setting. Students can work quietly, take breaks, or collaborate gently without loud or unpredictable sensory input. While there can be some upfront costs to this sort of event, some fun examples could be a Lego free-build night, model kit assembly, miniature painting and Meccano building.
- **Puzzle or strategy nights**
 - Puzzle nights or strategy nights can encourage slow-paced thinking and quiet interaction. They avoid loud music or bright lights and allow students to engage deeply without social pressure. These types of events can range from a Chess night to an escape-room-in-a-box.
- **Calm film screenings (no flashing lights)**
 - Screenings without flashing lights or loud soundtracks create a predictable sensory experience. Students can sit where they feel comfortable, use ear defenders, or step out easily. Turn on subtitles to help students who are deaf, neurodivergent, or speak English as a second language follow along.
- **Tea & chat drop-ins**
 - Drop-ins are informal, quiet, and flexible. Students can join for a short time, sit quietly, or chat gently without structured activities or sensory overload. It allows students the freedom to know they can leave easily and can be a good option for socialising as they are usually quieter and smaller than larger society events.
- **Journaling or creative writing sessions**
 - Writing sessions are calm and introspective. They allow students to focus quietly, avoid social pressure, and engage in a low-stimulation activity with clear boundaries. These are also great on the run up to exams to help students express or reflect on difficult feelings. Additionally, while some events could involve conversation, there is also the potential to run a "Write Together" silent writing session, where students work together silently as a form of body doubling, which is especially useful for many neurodivergent students.