

Foreword

Every year at National Conference we hear students' unions from around the UK tell us that they don't want to be treated all the same. I agree. But that every year students' unions still feel like they are treated as an analogous group isn't good enough. Having thought about this when I was elected, I decided the main way to begin thinking about solving this problem is to go one stage further than just looking at students' unions. I want to understand how students define themselves in various different types of community when they're in education, whether it's in clubs and societies, courses and faculties, at graduations and matriculations at different campuses and sites or in houses and halls of residence; our students exist in many different kinds of community and if we are to succeed in empowering those communities to make change for themselves, we need to understand how they work.

This 'white paper' is a short consultation document to get us thinking. I want to know some key things from you about your perceptions of student communities, so I've pulled together some research to get you thinking. If you can respond prior to the zone conference, then feel free to do so – that will help inform our work, but otherwise, read the document and come along with your thoughts ready.

The document is broken up into a few parts beginning with some big thinking about trends that will affect our members and may change the way they act. Then we'll look at some information on how students participate and why, followed by a review of our work on activism and creating change-makers on a local level to remind us how we've been empowering students so far. Lastly, we'll begin to flesh out some ideas which we'll explore at the conference about how student communities are formed, how they are sustained, why they die and how students relate to them. Once conference is over, we'll aim to publish another short paper which will help think about what NUS and what students' unions need to do in order to really understand how to support student communities.



Raechel Matthey
Vice-President Union Development



Diversity of Students' Unions, Diversity of Student Communities

Introduction

National overview of some student communities

Based on statistics available from the NUS Membership Intelligence Data Survey (MINDS), given to NUS from a variety of different sources, but primarily students' unions themselves, we know that across the UK in our unions there are at least:

- 2,024 student clubs;
- 7,566 societies;
- 96,950 registered members of clubs;
- 246,951 registered members of societies;
- 40,887 students involved in community projects;
- 26,454 students involved in RAG;
- 4,540 students involved in student print media,
- 5,696 students involved in broadcast media;
- 2,649 community projects run around the UK;
- 246,617 students voted in students' union elections;

On top of this, there are many other different ways students define into communities. We don't know how many students live in halls of residence around the UK compared to students living in privately rented or owned accommodation. Similarly, we don't know how many students at an institution feel like a part of a university as opposed to a course or module. In many ways we don't need to know, we just need to be able to say that some students will identify into those groups, and our job is to ensure that we can support students' unions to support them.

We're asking the wrong questions

So, when we are talking about students, we have to realise that one student may define into all of the groups above or none of them. Do students see themselves as members of a union or do they identify into much more complex groups? If the answer to that question is that students are more complex beings than just fitting into one box, then why do we ask the question "how do we get more students involved in the union?" Surely, the question should be, *how do we allow students to form communities themselves which are supported by the union?*

How else do think of students?

We have lots of information available about students which we can cut up in different ways to help us understand more about various different student communities. For example, looking at the data in NUS MINDS, we know that the 10% of universities with the highest dropout rates spend on average £598,359 in block grants for their students' unions. At the other end of the scale, we know that the 10% of universities with the lowest dropout rates spend on average £1,525,286 on block grants for their students' unions. Whilst we can't say that a high block grant leads to better retention rates, we can begin to paint a picture of the



environment which allows students to stay in university. If we compare some other factors, we can build a clearer picture.

	Top 10% Drop-Out	Bottom 10 % Drop-Out
Mean Block Grant	£598,359	£1,525,386
Mean Block Grant/FTE	£42	£86
Mean Students Involved in Community Projects	66	902
Mean Election Turnout	12.8%	26.4%
Mean spend on Clubs and Socs	£23,554	£132,277

Again, we begin to ask questions. Is it the resources available to students who belong to institutions on the right hand column that allows them to have such good retention rates, or is it that institutions on the left hand column draw in students from a wider variety of backgrounds? Are students who attend universities in the right hand column predisposed to voting in elections? Do students who attend universities in the left hand column have less time to get involved in community projects?

These questions are all top-down in their nature. Seeing institutions as the same and identifying catch-all responses. Instead, by taking a bottom-up approach, we should be able to start thinking more carefully about what's going on in different student communities. How do students identify on a local level? What systems do we have in place to support student communities forming? How do we support student communities overcoming barriers including access to finances and time? How can we empower student communities to overcome problems themselves and become self-sustaining? By thinking differently about how we view student communities we might be able to change the nature of the support we give to them.

How other student groups organise

Within the bracket of clubs and societies we already have a wide variety of student communities. Some are small and others large. Some are built around social activity and some around competition. Some are heavily resourced, some hardly receive any support at all. If we go on, we begin to think about how students feel; some students are totally loyal to one kind of group but have an on-off relationship with others, some students go on holiday with members of certain communities and wouldn't dream of it with others and some students enjoy a life-long relationship with members of some communities but in others that relationship dies at graduation. These are all important factors to think about when we're trying to understand how communities form, why they stick together, what is special about them and how we can replicate the magic in other groups.

ACTION: Ahead of Zone Conference, prepare a list with the following headings and fill in the table with as many different student communities as possible. If you send it to us, we'll print off your responses.



Community	Community Particulars	Size	Trait 1	Trait 1
Societies	Faith Based	Small	Values based	
Societies	Political	Small	Formed from a difference of views	
Societies	Social	Medium	Highly specialist (red wine soc)	High drop out rate
Houses	Halls	Ultra Large	Limited choice involved	No sense of belonging
Houses	Private Renting	Micro	Friendship based	Life-long friendships formed
Houses	JCRs	Large	Belonging to community	Sense of identity
Event	Freshers	Ultra Large	Short time-span event	Sense of belonging

Parallels

What looks similar between certain groups, which begin independently but share similar characteristics

As a result of your work, we'll replicate this exercise at zone conference to begin to understand whether there are any trends or patterns amongst student communities. We want to understand whether all micro communities have the same traits which help them form, or whether there is nothing similar amongst them. We want to think about whether there is a relationship between length of time in that community and sense of belonging so we can begin to explore how to replicate that sense of belonging certain events and communities help us feel.

What real-world examples are there?

Furthermore, we're keen to think outside the students' union box. Where you have examples of 'real-world' communities, we want you to include those. Many people attend Glastonbury Festival, which for a few days for both the people at the event and the people outside the event can seem like a real community has formed, but it fades away. What can we learn from this? How do people feel about the festival a year after they've been? Ten years after they've been? What is it that makes that community form, sustain and die? And, what, if anything, could we use that model for?

Where you've been part of a community outside the student movement, we want you think about all the same factors as we've identified in the table above and bring that thinking to zone conference.

What key questions does this leave us with?

By the end of this process, we should have a key set of questions and statements that we've identified which might include; where student communities want to instill a sense of belonging in their members, what is the maximum size they can be?



After this conference, we'll then send a set of broad policy proposals to students' unions for consultation and amendment which will focus on the actions involved in these different processes – specifically thinking about how NUS can support you in empowering student communities and how you can support each other.

Mapping and Deepening Participation

NUS and students' unions have been looking at why students get involved for some time. At NUS we reported recently in two separate studies that there was a raft of barriers which stopped students getting involved and a number of drivers which pushed them towards involvement. Similarly, we looked at what 'deep participation' was and how we could extend that across the movement. We found some interesting results.

Below are two interesting tables which looked at barriers and motivators for the most and least engaged students. We should have this in mind when we're thinking about how communities form. If ¾ of people involved in clubs and societies do so to have fun, what can we do to make that easier? Do we need to have elections for committee places if people just want to have fun? Why should there be a minimum member number if only six people want to be part of the beard growing club? If almost ¾ of students involved in the union would get involved in campaigns to improve things for a specific group – how do we fund campaigns to ensure this is clear? What impact do these results have on already involved students?

Top three motivations for involved students

Activity Type	Motivation 1	Motivation 2	Motivation 3
Clubs and Societies	To have fun 74%	To meet new people/make friends 70%	To develop skills 39%
Volunteering	To improve things/help people 55%	To gain work experience/develop my CV 51%	To develop skills 44%
Student Representatives	To improve things/help people 71%	To gain work experience/develop my CV 60%	To develop skills 49%
Standing for Election	To improve things/help people 71%	To gain work experience/develop my CV 60%	To develop skills 49%
Campaigning for the Union	To improve things for a group 72%	My personal values 50%	To develop skills 21%
Voting	It is part of my responsibility as a student 45%	To support a particular candidate to be elected 20%	If people don't vote, they have no right to complain 18%

For students who aren't involved in the union, 65% say there isn't enough time due to studies. Bearing in mind that the primary reason for those who are involved is to have fun – what responsibility have we got to those students who work the hardest to try and take clubs and societies to them?



Almost 80% of students who aren't involved in volunteering can't do so because of time constraints. What new ways can we introduce to help students give their time flexibly to a volunteering cause they might be passionate about? 30% of candidates didn't vote because they knew nothing about the candidates; how much time and effort do we put into advertising the process of elections, without really profiling any of the candidates? If we want to increase student engagement with elections – why aren't we doing more to increase candidates' profiles rather than leaving it all to them?

These are all questions that we need to consider when thinking about how student communities form.

Top three barriers for uninvolved students

Activity Type	Barrier 1	Barrier 2	Barrier 3
Clubs and Societies	Not enough time due to studies 65%	I'm not sure how to get involved 29%	Not enough time due to paid work 28%
Volunteering	Not enough time due to studies 78%	I'm not sure how to get involved 33%	Not enough time due to paid work 26%
Student Representatives	Not enough time due to studies 60%	I'm not interested in it 48%	I don't know what I could offer 38%
Standing for Election	I do not have the time 47%	I am not a political person 34%	I do not think I would be elected 29%
Campaigning for the Union	I was too busy 48%	I did not know how to get involved 30%	I am not interested in student politics 29%
Voting	I didn't know enough about the candidates 30%	I am not interested in politics 15%	I'm not interested in the union generally 14%

A greater understanding of deepening participation

This project found that according to other key sources of participation data, that depth of engagement was remarkably similar. The highest levels of engagement in politics (according to the Hansard Society) and civic society generally (according to the NCVO) were roughly the same as in students' unions. Whilst different language was used, the figures broadly balanced throughout. The table below shows the comparisons.

Engagement Level	Hansard Society Segmentation	Exeter Segmentation UK Mean 2009	Exeter Students After University	NCVO Model 2009-10	NUS Student Engagement Index Benchmark
Most engaged	Already active (14%)	Campaigners (7%)	Campaigners (10%)	Civic Activism (10%)	Deep Participant (14%)
		Politically Engaged (8%)	Politically Engaged (31%)		
	Willing localists (14%)	Community Organiser (16%)	Community Organiser (34%)	Civic Consultation (18%)	Student Organiser (16%)
Least engaged	Satisfied by unenthusiastic (15%)	Social Participants (33%)	Social Participants (18%)	Civic Participation (34%)	Social Participant (34%)



	Onlookers (20%)	Bystanders (36%)	Bystanders (7%)	Not engaged (38%)	Passive participant (26%)
	Disengaged and apathetic (14%)				
	Exaggerators (11%)				
	Alienated (12%)				
				Alienated (10%)	

We should ask whether this data means whether these numbers are fixed and that people become more or less actively involved depending on their circumstances, but that this broadly levels out. Or whether actually, we need to find out how we can move people from the least engaged category to the most engaged, shifting the balance.

If we are to identify how student communities form, what impact does the information above have?

ACTION: where your students' union has done work to segment or better understand your members, please either send it to us in advance of the conference, so we can have examples of your work available.

The thing that connects the mapping and deepening participation work more than we previously realized is that it focuses on the individual rather than the community. We hope that this piece of work and policy making will help us all to understand how communities form, not just how individuals act – change comes from groups of students, not from individuals.

Activism: we are the Change

Introduction

Recently, NUS' work around activism has adopted the theory of community organising in the US. For the past two years we've run events nationally and locally aimed at furthering this approach to activism, making it more local and more relevant to students through projects like I am the Change. Our work around activism, whilst popular, could always improve, which is why we want to ensure the discussion around empowering student communities and activism happens simultaneously. Key points to explore might include, how can we use our experience in empowering activists to empower existing student communities? What work can NUS do to empower unions to create more active student communities? What difficulties have students' unions found in helping student communities become active student communities?

Background to our I am the Change work (stats on numbers trained, projects funded, impact achieved) Dani has all the stats – she's back from leave next weds

Skills For Change is our new training initiative to support unions in developing student activists on your campus. Over the past two years we have supported activist development by delivering campaigns training to



students in students' unions. This has been so successful that we're now seeing more and more requests for this training as well as unions delivering their own amazing training programmes too.

With that in mind, we've put together a training package aimed directly at students and ready to be delivered by staff and officers in students' unions. This training gives students all the skills they need to campaign whilst giving SUs the flexibility to deliver the training in the way that suits their students best.

Our Community Organising Ambition Pre-General Election and Beyond

As part of its work in supporting national, regional and local campaigning activity, NUS delivers activist and community development projects designed to build campaigning capacity in students' unions and across the student movement.

We've recruited a community organiser, who will lead on this project which will involve setting up twelve community organising pilots across the UK. Each pilot will be coordinated by a part time student union/Nations office-based community organiser (which we are about to start recruiting for). The organising will be focused around voter registration (also working in partnership with Bite the Ballot), employment and other issues specific to each pilot area.

The project will be launched on Oct 15th with a community organising event **'We are the Change, students making change in our communities.**

'We are the Change' is NUS' first ever community organising event, and will launch NUS' exciting new community organising project which aims to support students' unions capacity to develop local action and community organising across the student movement. Aimed at SU officers and staff, the day will equip delegates with community organising and campaigning skills via a range of skills workshops. Delegates will also hear from and have the opportunity to question a panel of experts in the field of community organising and a chance to network and develop practical alliances with other organisers, campaigners and activists in regional groups. Organisations confirmed so far include TUC, Citizens UK, Bite the Ballot, Movement for Change and Locality.

A vision for Students Driving Change

As well as the well versed arguments about students being more likely to be an active citizen if they're been engaged in students' union activity, there's another more recent reason, which we have been exploring.

it's looking increasingly likely that one of the prime motivations behind the lobbying bill, for the Lib Dems at least, is to specifically stop NUS from running a Votes for Students II campaign. Given our success at the last election in securing MPs to support the no to fees pledge, a lot of the discussion around the rationale for the lobbying bill is around stopping us doing something similar in future. So, as well as empowering students to be more active citizens in future, we also have to defend our ability to do it now – or we risk losing a generation of active citizens because of a narrow minded political decision.

The role of Unions in Supporting Students Driving Change



How students' unions can work with NUS to drive change

Students' unions need to take advantage of our campaigns effectiveness and activist development programmes and also be part of We Are the Change if we want to improve our ability to support students to drive change. Further, we need to stitch the issue of activism and student communities together in order to empower students like we never have before. This is why it is so important that you get involved at this conference.

Conclusion

Essentially, we want you to think. By the time you've come to Zone Conference, we'll have started to develop a framework which will help us understand the issues clearer, but until then; look at what we've asked of you and begin to prepare your answers. Zone Conference is just the beginning of the conversation, not the end.

