

# Key Theme Report

## **Student Action, Social Impact**

Policy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013

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# Context

## What do we mean by Impact?

“The difference you make is often called your impact” (NCVO). The word impact is often used interchangeably with “outcome” but in simple terms it’s the effect of what you do (or your “outputs”). So impact measurement is a process of understanding, measuring and reporting on the value created by your organisation. This value can be social, environmental and/or economic. As this value can’t always be expressed in financial terms, in the third sector other methods are used to explain the real change or impact that organisations have made on the world (more on this later).

## Context

Third sector organisations (TSOs) have long been required to demonstrate their impact on society and the environment; the Charity Commission in England and Wales has worked hard to ensure TSOs operate in the public benefit. However, in recent years a number of internal and external forces have combined to increase the demand for impact data.

Externally, in the context of austerity and a competitive funding there’s with less money to go round. In order to secure initial and ongoing funding, TSOs are having to work harder to demonstrate what funders (government or otherwise) get for their money. The Public Social Value Act (2012) adds a legislative dimension to this trend by encouraging TSOs to consider and evidence their social impact.

Internally, a partnership of influential organisations including NCVO and the Association of Chief Executives of Voluntary Organisations (ACEVO) set up the [Inspiring Impact Network](#) to support enhanced impact measurement practise. Although the drivers here are related to securing funding, measuring impact has also been said to help TSOs act increase their effectiveness, attract volunteers and improve staff motivation (Lumley et al., 2011; NPC 2010).

# Measuring Impact in Students' Unions

Students' Unions are no exception to this phenomenon, however there are a particular set of conditions and factors specific to students' unions. Explicitly there are strategic, democratic, financial and political dimensions as to why it is crucial that students' unions are able to have an impact that they can understand and articulate.

## Political

Getting the public to accept the profound changes to the education landscape was built on a framing of students as the sole beneficiaries of their education. In a sense, higher fees were legitimised on the basis that education functions to create wealth for students by making them a more desirable commodity in a job market and therefore they should be the ones to pay for the privilege.

Although many disparate voices including NUS argued that Universities, Colleges, their students and Students' Unions produce social value that impacts far beyond students, there was relatively little evidence to support this claim. If the student movement is going to build a counter narrative that students and their institutions make a valuable contribution to society, not least through volunteering, cultural enrichment, knowledge creation, job creation, progressive campaigning and the creation of better citizens, then it is crucial that the student movement is better placed to evidence this claim.

## Financial

The changes to the funding system brought with them a new emphasis on institutions frantically working to prove their value in the newly established market of higher education. As part of these changes came a renewed concern for customer relations, student satisfaction, the NSS and other market indicators crucial to justifying the top rate of fees required to fill the funding gap left by the government.

With student engagement and student satisfaction a market necessity rather than an optional extra, many institutions are looking to their students' union and wondering what they really get in return for their annual block grant. This gives rise to two polar trends; students' unions that are able to demonstrate their impact to their institution and how they are in a unique position to enhance the student experience are seeing a rise in their block grants. Conversely, students' unions that are failing to articulate this value are facing cuts to their grants and, at an alarming number of universities, "student services" buildings popping up - organising student activities, providing advice and support and in some cases even organising course reps and other "student voice" initiatives. Being able to demonstrate impact is crucial to building trust with institutions who, in the absence of other meaningful measures, may resort to Q23 in the NSS as the sole indicator of the students' union value.

## Democratic

Failing to measure their impact may not only leave students' unions with a financial deficit but also a democratic one. Arguably, even more important than the institutions view of the students' union is that of the students. If a students' union cannot articulate what value it brings to its members then it becomes very difficult for students to hold their organisation and its elected leaders to account. However, where students' unions take time to measure and communicate their impact then democracy flourishes; students find it easier to understand why they should bother to engage, join a club or society, propose a motion or vote in an election as they understand its impact on their lives and the lives of others.

## Strategic

Many organisations that have integrated impact measurement into their practises have reported that it has significantly increased their efficiency and effectiveness. Through constantly questioning what you want to achieve and why you're doing what you're doing, organisations are able to reassess some activities that, even if they've always done them, have no tangible benefit for their stakeholders. This is a helpful process for students' unions who typically tend to focus on numerical outputs rather than meaningful outcomes. After all, there's little value of 4000 students voting in a referendum if the policy is never enacted, or training an army of course reps who make no improvements to students' learning experience

# Membership Engagement

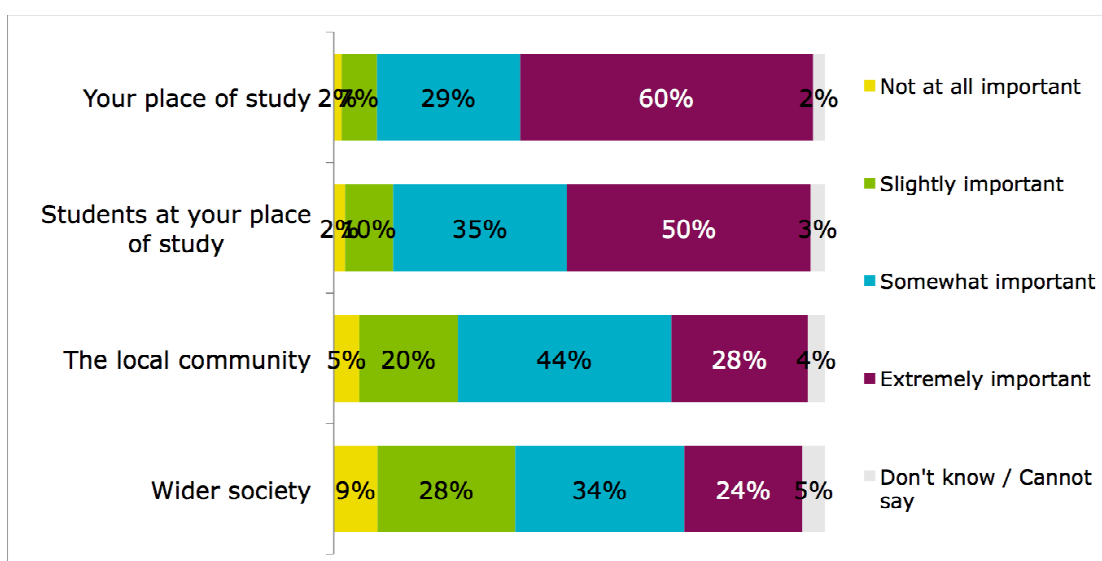
## Feedback from UD Zone

At Union Development zone, a consistent feeling was expressed that students' unions can have a valuable impact across students, universities/colleges, local communities and wider society and the need to create partnerships across all these spaces

As you can see from the table below, the majority of respondents believe that it is somewhat important or extremely important for students' unions to have an impact on all four areas. However, the emphasis is really on the need to have an impact on the place of study and the students.

## Student opinion survey

The NUS Group *Student Opinion Survey* is a regular survey emailed to a sample of students from the NUS extra database. 932 respondents answered the question, "To what extent, if at all, do you think it's important that your students' union is able to influence your place of study, students at your place of study, the local community, wider society?" Of these 932 respondents 44% were male and 54% female. 73% were UK students, 11% EU, 16% Outside EU, 15% FE, 41% first year UG, 18% second year+ UG and 19% were PG.



## Co-producing the Impact Guide

In order to begin to fill the “impact gap”, last year NUS commissioned the think and do tank New Economics Foundation (nef) to work with ten, pilot students’ unions in developing a way of helping students’ unions measure and demonstrate their impact. Nef, the ten pilot unions and NUS worked together to produce a reference guide and workbook that is broadly consistent with the principles of Social Return on Investment (SROI). Both the reference guide and workbook accompany this report however, the basic principles of the approach is based on three key principles:

### Stakeholders are central

This analysis focuses on the people who are important to an organisation – its stakeholders. Each stakeholder group, such as students, the university or local community, is involved in identifying their own objectives, and reporting on how well those objectives are met.

### Theory of change – Know how your work creates impact

The things you do are designed to create change. Creating an impact map – a flowchart showing the journey from the inputs to the outcomes that emerge – helps you think about how your actions affect your stakeholders, and also gives you a clear way of telling your story to others.

### Transparency – the process is open to scrutiny

Being open about your assumptions and decisions will make your findings more credible with your audience. It will also provide a good

opportunity to test your assumptions and think about where your decision-making could be improved.

These 3 key principles live out across 5 stages of an impact assessment

#### Stage 1: Define the scope

- Determine the main objective of what you’re trying to measure the impact of
- Identify the most important activities or outcomes for assessment
- Select the stakeholders that will need to be consulted

#### Stage 2: Understand what changes

- Understand the difference between outputs and outcomes
- Engage stakeholders
- Create an impact map

#### Stage 3: Measure the change

- Select indicators
- Collect data
- Engage stakeholders (again)

#### Stage 4: Determine attribution

- Think about other factors
- Establish benchmarks
- Check for displacement<sup>1</sup>

#### Stage 5: Analyse findings – report and embed learning

- Identify audiences and interests
- Communicate the findings they care about
- Embed the learning

<sup>1</sup> Displacement is when the benefit for one person comes at the expense of another. For example, if the union helps a student find off campus housing, does that mean someone else in the city will not find housing?

University of Bristol Students' Union (UBU) was one of the pilot unions who developed this model with NUS and nef. UBU used it to evidence how their academic societies created a better university experience, improved employability and created a stronger more democratic students' union. They then used this to help their institution recognise the educational value of UBU's activities.

Nef used the model themselves at Manchester Met and Warwick but, unlike the model they developed with students' union, they followed the traditional SROI model and converted the outcomes into financial value. Key findings included:

- Just one reading programme organised by Warwick volunteers works with over 100 primary school students and helps improve reading fluency, the enjoyment of reading and aspirations to the value of £290,000 for pupils and the local community
- International students involved in volunteering at Warwick add cultural learning benefits for the local community, the community cohesion benefits are estimated at £48,000
- At MMU having higher than average levels of students from low-income households creates the principle public benefit. Through this one activity MMU contributes £147.2 million to society a year.



# Challenges and Recommendations

## Key Challenges

The SROI model developed by nef clearly has potential to help students' union understand, develop and articulate their impact. However, even with this work in place a number of challenges remain:

- How do we help students' unions have a bigger, better impact? It is impossible to measure an impact that doesn't exist; it may also be politically undesirable to measure a fairly meagre or negative impact. We must therefore work to improve the quality of students' unions and, in turn, their impact.
- Even the better resourced students' unions involved in the pilot project with nef struggled to firstly get their head round the concepts involved (e.g. measuring outcomes not outputs) and then having the capacity to carry out the work involved. Students' unions that succeeded had a staff member dedicated to the project, but this may not be an option for smaller students' unions.
- Perhaps one of the greatest challenges to having, then measuring a valuable impact is the democratic deficit that exists across students' unions, universities, colleges and wider society, restricting the extent to which students can make a difference. For example, in the same student opinion survey, only 53% of students agreed that, "my students' union has an effective and democratic structure in place for gaining feedback from all learners in

the institution". In another survey with 2836 respondents from 11 students' unions at HE and FE institutions, only 23% agreed that arguments from them would be effective at convincing the local authority to adopt a particular policy. This figure dropped to just 16% when they were asked about convincing the government compared to 64% regarding their students' union and 50% regarding their university or college.

## Recommendations

The work of nef with the ten pilot unions has made a great deal of progress in terms of providing a practical method for measuring impact in students' unions. However, more work needs to be done to both increase the impact students' union have and helping them to measure and articulate this impact accordingly:

Measuring their impact can have strategic, financial, democratic and broader political benefits for students' unions and the student movement. Conversely, failing to demonstrate value can result in the reverse: students' unions risk losing money, effectiveness, lower democratic engagement and relevance to members.

To this end, students' unions should have a vision for how they are going to have an impact on students, university/colleges and wider society

Trustee boards, officers and senior staff must be trained on impact measurement and its benefits

The more democratic students' unions, universities, colleges, councils and the UK is the

more students will be able to make a difference and have an impact on the world around them. Building partnerships with institutions and local authorities has a key role to play in this.

This theme also clearly crosses over with the Democratic Universities theme that recommends:

Students' unions should be at the vanguard of any campaign to democratise universities and build student partnerships. (In this context this campaign shouldn't be restricted to universities)

To achieve democratic universities, neoliberal corporate forms of governance and the logics of marketisation and competition must be challenged. (We must also remember that access isn't influence when it comes to university meetings/decision making)

Students' unions must be ready to scrutinise the democratic deficit in their own governance. (Again this should also apply to local and national governance in this context)

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