

Developing Academic Societies

Creating and developing excellent academic societies

Using statistics this briefing highlights why quality academic societies are important to your union and institution. It also offers advice, ideas and suggested activities for developing these societies.

What are Academic Societies?

This briefing is about developing the societies in your SU that are based on a course or subject of study. It will not directly cover ideas for developing enterprise, employability, or careers-focused societies; however it is fine if in your SU such societies are grouped together with course-based ones.

Some of the ideas in this briefing will also be relevant to improving all societies, regardless of type, so have a read even if you don't specifically want to develop your academic societies.

Something to consider when talking about your own societies is how the label fits with the structure of your organisation. Perhaps they're called 'departmental societies' – do they match up with the departments in your institution? Maybe they're subject societies and are grouped by subject. They could be called course-based societies and be linked to specific courses. All are fine and it's up to you to decide what yours are called, and how they're structured. NUS does not have a set term for these as it's important that they reflect your SU, however for clarity this briefing will refer to them as 'academic societies'.

Why Are Academic Societies Interesting?

There's some interesting statistics that came out of the NUS *Success in the Student Market*, a report based on evidence from students and

from students' unions discussing the behaviour, needs and wants of students. It is primarily based on innovation and student spending, however the background research discusses motivations for participation in extra-curricular and co-curricular activities.

Success in the Student Market reveals that 'appetite is increasing for course-related societies' and it also explains that the primary focus for students is academic activities. A suggestion is made that students' union should consider ways of involving themselves with academic activities.

The report highlights what is important to students when choosing a college or university, and what is important during their time as a student. Course-related societies are considered more important than 'fun/special interest' societies and sports clubs/teams. This is interesting as students' union funding is often higher for sports than it would be for academic societies. Sports equipment, facilities and transport is often very expensive and perhaps academic societies don't need quite as much funding, however this data could be helpful as evidence for why there should be more investment in academic societies.

The report additionally shows the proportion of student participation in extracurricular activities; course related/academic societies are most popular, with 31% of students participating.

The report discusses the different results from international students to home students, which is useful if you are working on improving support for international students.

A Good Place to Start

If you are hoping to improve the quality of opportunities generally, academic societies are a great place to start.

Increasing participation

When thinking about how students' build their identity, most will identify with their department before any other aspect of university life (so they are a biology student first, and a cheerleader second). If your union can make yourself directly relevant to the primary reason students' are at university, then you are likely to see a broader spectrum of students participating in union activity. This is of course, only true if the activities societies run are also relevant to the subject, not just drinking societies.

Working with your institution will create new ways of promoting academic societies which should lead to increased membership. For example if an academic society improves the relationship they have with their department, the staff of the department should help to promote the society. They may also be more likely to invite committees to do lecture shout outs or have a noticeboard in their department.

Increasing number of societies

If you hope to increase the number of societies existing, it could be beneficial to map the structure of your current academic societies and to match this up to the structure of your academic departments.

Perhaps your societies are currently course-based societies, but there are some courses

that don't have their own society. Could you encourage students on that course to create a new society?

Working across union services

Academic societies offer a great place to start activities that involve working with other departments in your union. A few ideas for this are described below.

Cross-Union Working

Academic representation

A fairly new idea for students' union is to encourage your academic societies and your academic representatives work together. This can be done in a way that suits your organisation and is a great place to innovate in Student Opportunities.

Some ways of doing this are:

- Academic rep sits on the academic society committee
- Academic rep attends committee meetings but isn't on committee
- Society president sits on staff-student committee with the academic rep
- Academic rep attends society socials
- Academic rep and society committee meet regularly to discuss issues and plan joint action
- Academic rep and society work together on specific campaigns

If you would like to do this in your union, consider whether you will create a structure that all academic societies and all reps will work within, or whether you will allow the societies and reps to decide their own ways of working. This is up to you and will depend on how your societies and reps are already structured, whether it is easy to make them work together and whether the institution is welcoming to new

ideas. If you're concerned about this, perhaps try it out with one or two societies first?

Sports

Work with the sports department in your institution or hire facilities so that your academic societies can establish an intramural league. This doesn't have to be just football; it could be any sport that the societies are interested in playing. Perhaps get all society members to vote on a sport?

Don't worry about insurance! Sports insurance can often be separate from the insurance that covers society activities, which can be discouraging. Check with your insurer and check your policy – there will be a way around it.

Volunteering

Working with your academic societies and your institution, develop volunteering opportunities that relate to the skills and knowledge that a student is developing through their course.

For example, develop opportunities for computer science students to voluntarily teach elderly people to use a computer, or English students could offer support to children learning to read.

Many academic societies run outreach projects in local schools. Interaction with real students studying at a university has some of the biggest impacts in helping pupils understand what university is really like. This is fantastic widening participation activity and will be popular with your institution.

Campaigns & promotions

Academic societies could support some of the campaigns and promotions run by the union. Encouraging respondents for the National Student Survey is traditionally supported by academic reps, but academic societies could

also help. Perhaps ask them to have a laptop at their meeting or social and encourage them to get respondents then reward the society that gets the most?

With NSS there is also an opportunity for the society, the academic reps, and their department to work together to try and improve scores. Encourage them to meet and decide on a score that they would all like to see improved, then identify actions for the department, the society and the academic rep to make this happen.

If your union runs Student Led Teaching Awards, this could be another key area where societies could help.

For all of these initiatives it is important to get the societies involved as early as you can, so that they understand fully and can feel they've made a valuable contribution. Also, try and involve the whole society and not just the committee. Involving the members with union campaigns should make them feel empowered and involved, which may lead to them to deeper engagement.

Co-curricular & Extra-Curricular

When talking about academic societies there is sometimes confusion around labelling their activities as 'co-curricular' or 'extra-curricular'.

'Curricular' comes from 'curriculum' meaning a course of study. 'Co-curricular' means complementing the curriculum, 'extra-curricular' means outside of the curriculum.

It is important to define this if your institution needs a definition. For example if there is an award scheme where the institution recognises extra-, but not co-curricular activities. However most of the time the difference isn't significant, and perhaps a successful academic society

offers both co- and extra-curricular activity and isn't limited to just one type.

Working With Your Institution

The idea of "partnership" stems from a rejection of the idea of students as consumers. NUS believes that students should be active partners, with their institution, in their education. This means taking on shared responsibilities and shared ownership of all aspects of university life.

Academic societies are a fantastic way to develop real and lasting partnerships at departmental levels. The aim is to bring all members of a community (in this case, the departmental community) together to solve problems and share ideas together.

Here are some practical ideas for working with your institution:

1. Society work with careers/employability team and department of study to organise employability events (E.g.: careers fair/skills development workshops)
2. Invite institutional staff to join the society as associate members. This is a good reason to examine the policies the union holds on associate membership.
3. Invite academic staff to attend society events. This can also sometimes be made into a feature of the event. For example the society could organise a staff vs. student quiz or sports match.
4. Invite academic staff to deliver a presentation or lecture.

5. Encourage the society to have a regular presence in their department. This could be with a permanent notice board space, or they could have a weekly drop-in where the committee are in a specified place. If possible, book rooms for society meetings in or near your department, and let staff know about them.

It is sometimes a concern that institution won't allow some society activities. For example, academic staff may be uncomfortable with a society organising dissertation workshops where advice is given, as there is a chance that either the wrong advice is offered, or there is a risk of plagiarism.

Make an agreement with them and the society where expectations are set and both parties agree on what advice is OK, and which isn't. This can be done as an agreement to cover a year's society activities, or just for a one-off event.

Ideas for Academic Societies' Activities

Success in the Student Market states that the main reasons for students participating in course-related/academic societies are to help with their course or study (29%) and to get to know new friends better (17%).

Hopefully some of the ideas below will help your societies to introduce innovative activities.

- Study workshops – regular space booked where members can come together to study or work on projects
- Revision sessions – space booked for group revision or for individuals to work alone but in the company of their peers
- Guest speakers (relevant to course)
- Guest speakers (alumni – perhaps with a careers focus?)

- Themed fancy dress relating to their course
- Course-based volunteering (volunteering linked to their subject of study)
- Formal dinner/awards event
- Buddy/mentor programme – new students given a mentor/buddy in the year above. This can also be useful for 2nd/3rd year students who could be mentored by a postgraduate or more experienced student
- Trips – could be organised with the academic department
- Lecturers vs. students - quiz/sport/Mastermind?
- Campaigns – support the campaigns run by the SU or by their academic rep
- Fundraising – work with your student fundraising group/RAG
- Support with students’ union elections – perhaps ask the politics society to help with voter engagement or to sit on your elections working group
- Support with students’ union communications – give your media society a project to promote a campaign, or perhaps your elections
- Film showing – relevant to studies and follow-up with a group discussion
- Some SUs have a rule for their clubs and societies that states that for every event relating to drinking, they must organise 1 or 2 non-drinking socials. This is then either enforced through positive encouragement or through punishment for breaking the rule.
- Positive reinforcement of ‘good behaviour’ will always help your clubs and societies. Praise the ones that are organising quality events and say nothing about the ones that just go on their monthly pub crawl.
- Rewards can also be more tangible – look back at the Student Opportunities webinar on reward and recognition. This talks about different ways to reward societies and clubs.

Encouraging Quality Activities

It is sometimes difficult to encourage all societies to organise meaningful, high-quality events. Students’ unions often say that societies, particularly academic ones, only organise bar crawls or alcohol-focused events.

Here are some ideas to help with this:

- Encourage the committee to consider their ‘unique selling point’, and when they’ve identified this they can think of events that match their USP. This may not eradicate drinking socials but at least their events will be more relevant to their members’ interests.

Further Information

This briefing was created following a Student Opportunities Lunch & Learn webinar that took place on 15th October 2013. The slides from this [webinar](#) are available on the Student Opportunities pages on NUS Connect.

If you would like any further information about anything in this guide, please contact studentopportunities@nus.org.uk