

Deepening participation

Develop strategies to increase participation

Building on the recommendations developed through the mapping participation report, this briefing details ways for students' unions to increase engagement by students across student opportunity provision.

Background

In 2012 NUS carried out research into why students participate in their students' union. It provided an overview of how students engage with the students' union and the motivations and barriers to involvement.

The report also explored pathways that students take to involvement and focussed on ways to encourage further and deeper participation.

This briefing takes the recommendations one step further to explain ideas for engagement activity based around these recommendations.

Recommendations

1 - Get out and talk to students face to face

The tracking of student journeys through the students' union indicated that students who personally got to know students' union officers was a key entry point to becoming more involved in the student movement.

The more officers are able to get out and talk to students, the more will be known about the purpose of the students' union. An open-door policy is not enough, as many students suggested feeling intimidated from entering offices in the union buildings.

Actively seeking out students and promoting the students' union is essential to spreading the word about all that the union can offer.

2 - Focus on communication

Across the board, students indicated that not knowing how to get involved was one of the major barriers to participating in students' union activities.

Knowing about the activities and opportunities is, of course, the first and often most important step to becoming involved. Ensure that information is accessible and that online resources include updated information from clubs and societies and other various events on offer, not just students' union specific events.

A centralised calendar on the homepage is something that many students were keen to have. Additionally unions can support committee members and student representatives to communicate their offerings effectively so that students know what is available and how to get involved.

3 - Support brand recognition

A lack of knowledge about the differentiation between the activities in the students' union and the university was fairly consistent across the various students' unions researched.

There is a clear need for students' unions to take ownership of their activities and events and ensure that these student experiences can be attributed to the union.

Ensure that the branding of events, activities and opportunities can be attributable to the union in order for recognition to grow.

4 - Get the 'student organisers' on board with the students' union

Student representatives and club and society committee members have an important role to play in the promotion of the students' union, yet in many cases this is not a role that is taken on.

For the most part these leaders indicated greater knowledge of the students' union functions than the average student in clubs and societies. This group has the capability and visibility to promote the union.

Incorporating education about the union to committee member and student rep trainings could help to bolster the union's name and to create a trickle-down effect that will reach greater numbers of students.

5 - Think outside the Freshers' box

Freshers' Fair is no doubt a successful vehicle for promoting students' union opportunities. Research has shown that students are generally

satisfied with the information and opportunities they discover during the week.

However, those who are not in their first year, including second and third years and postgraduates, have indicated that they have found it difficult to find out about opportunities and that they feel excluded from getting involved if they did not do so during the Freshers' period.

By putting more resources into promoting activities and events throughout the year and to students of all levels of study, fewer students will be excluded from taking part.

6 - Continue to get to know your students and share research

As ever, knowing what your student population wants and needs is essential to improving the user experience and getting more people involved. Students' unions are doing some excellent research to ensure that students' needs are taken into account. As every students' union is unique and faces different sets of challenges, this research can be done to suit your own needs but may have far-reaching appeal for other unions.

Identify groups of students who aren't engaging and find out why. Holding focus groups of specific groups is an excellent and fairly simple way of finding out a lot of information.

Additionally, sharing this research with other unions is an excellent way of supporting the larger movement towards increased engagement.

7 - Continue to support the union's physical space



While the online community is quickly becoming an important focus for students, many participants agreed that the students' union building remains an important focal point and that face-to-face interactions were a major trigger to participation.

While the online community continues to be important, physically being around other people involved and seeing what the union is up to still remains an essential aspect of the students' union experience.

While there are several barriers to this such as institutions with multiple campuses and large groups of commuter students, to name a few, the physical space of the union should continue to be supported in whatever ways possible to create a sense of community.

8 - Let students know about your success

Students have indicated that they don't really see the changes that the students' union can make and many do not believe that the students' union can create change. Ensure that when the students' union has a win, your students get to hear about it.

Even the smallest win, such as extending library hours or getting microwaves for the halls, can help students to not only see the changes that the students' union can make but will also begin to educate students about the purpose of the union and the ways in which it relates to and affects them.

9 - Consider the accessibility of students' union language

Students in the research expressed their lack of knowledge and frustration around the often bureaucratic nature of the students' union. Terms such as 'AGM' and 'sabs' were considered foreign to most students and

created a barrier to getting more involved in the democratic process.

Students' unions have begun to consider the use of language in their promotion of the union. By using accessible terms, the general student population will feel more included in the democratic processes of the students' union.

10 - Find students at their point of interest

Students in this research participated in a variety of activities, both within and outside the students' union. Rather than focusing solely on trying to get more students to become involved in the students' union, go out and see what students are already doing and support them in those activities.

Additionally, make the process of starting clubs and societies as easy and fair as possible so that students aren't put off by difficult and bureaucratic procedures.

Putting recommendations into practice

1 - Get out and talk to students face to face

- **Pitch up** – Get yourself a tent and some pop up banners or flags and create your very own temporary office. Pitching it in high traffic areas will make students stop and find out more details, rather than having to come into your office
- **Conversation challenge** – How many conversations with students can you have over a week? Use unique hash tags to track activity and make it a competition amongst your officer team, or societies council

- **Get into lectures** – Work with academic departments to identify key lectures, not just for first years, but across your intake to talk about opportunities for students to get involved in the union.

2 - Focus on communication

- **Three click challenge** – Can you get to the important information about how to be get involved in activity with three clicks or less on your website? If you have a long and laborious process you'll put students off straight away.
- **Social media** – Make sure you're utilising your unions social media channels to talk about opportunities. Think about how you can tie in activities to news stories, time of the year and trends in music/fashion etc.

3 - Support brand recognition

- **Branding bingo** – Create your very own union bingo. If you can spot more than ten different SU logos with no brand consistency or posters with five different font sizes you win. But winning isn't really the aim of this game. Look at your comms materials with a fresh pair of eyes and develop some consistency.
- **Be part of the team** – There is a growing trend encouraging students to feel part of 'Team X'. Think about fostering that team spirit that often exists in sports clubs across your other activities. Why not be a 'Team X volunteering superhero' or a 'Team X society superstar'.

4 - Get the 'leaders' on board with the students' union

- **Leaders get leaders** – How are you supporting your existing leaders to get more students engaged. Do you have leaflets they can give out to students to direct them in the right place, or do you encourage them to run their own social media engagement work.
- **Cross pollinating** – What do you do to get the rugby club involved in volunteering, or your RAG group supporting the drama society? Think about who you already interact with and how you can encourage them to get others involved in different activities.
- **Be seen and heard** – If your officers are well known why not make sure that they're seen to be engaging in a host of your activities. Instigate a sab challenge where each week they have to take it in turns trying new activities and then they have to blog or tweet about it
- **Start them early** – Utilise the leadership positions within halls of residence to get students to think about different activities then they might already be considering. Use an intra-mural programme to set up taster sessions throughout the year.

5 - Think outside the Freshers box

- **Give it a go programmes** – A great way to try out opportunities if you've missed freshers fair. Encourage your clubs and societies to think about ways to get students involved throughout the year, rather than at the beginning for club trials etc.
- **Don't pigeon hole** – Don't expect that your postgrad students will only want to engage in your postgrad society. Get out and ask them what they'd like their



activity provision to look like. Do this over the summer when many are still working or studying.

6 - Continue to get to know your students and share research

- **Interrogate your membership** – Make sure you make the most of your membership system to find out who is already involved. Think about dissecting the data by year of study, course/department, demographics. Then get out and talk to students where you have deficiencies. Find out why they aren't involved and what their ideal opportunity would be – then make that happen.
- **I'm an individual** – Think about segmenting your students differently. Rather than just 1st year, mature, international student. How else can you categorise their involvement. Think about motivations, areas of interest, type of engagement.
- **Ask around** – What knowledge do other similar unions have about their student engagement? You might not be the same but often unions will have great data that can help you think differently about your student engagement work.

7 - Continue to support the union's physical space

- **Pull up a chair** – You might not have very much room but having somewhere that students can come and talk to you in a welcoming and open environment is crucial. If you don't have an office how can you get creative, where could you have a temporary office?

- **Where the students' are** – You might not be able to move the whole students' union building but how can you have a physical presence in other areas. Whether it's a temporary office, a sit and chat corner or dedicated areas your students can use – how can you be where the student are?
- **The SU is all around** – What physical presence do you have in high volume areas? Notice boards, TV screens, computer screen savers. Make sure that you're everywhere you possibly can be and that the content space is exciting, welcoming and up-to-date.

8 - Let students know about your wins

- **#winningonwednesday** – How can you use social media to talk about your wins? Encourage students to tweet their own wins and share them, retweet etc to help foster a shared excitement in your students achievements.
- **Big and small** – Talk about the big wins as well as the small wins. Make sure you think about communicating wins across the breadth of your activity so that students feel like they've got something to be proud of, no matter what they're taking part in.
- **Success stories** – How do you use your comms materials to celebrate achievements, not just of your sports teams but also your societies, volunteers and RAG fundraisers – give everyone equal billing.

9 - Consider the accessibility of students' union language

- **Plain language** – Check that the information you're sending out makes sense to its target audience. Focus on explaining the acronyms you're using,

or the names of places to go to for more information. Try not to assume implied knowledge.

- **Make it easy** – Don't put extra barriers in the way to stop people getting involved. What language do you use when people are thinking about getting involved in your democratic procedures or setting up a new society. Look at how you explain concepts and check it's easy to understand.

10 - Find students at their point of interest

- **A life outside the bubble** – What are students already doing that you don't know about? Make sure you're encouraging people to continue to pursue their interests and offer as much support as you can. Say yes and see where it takes you, rather than no and crush any future potential engagement.
- **Hello community** – How do you support students undertaking activity in your local community? Do you have positive relationships with community volunteering programmes or sports clubs so you know what engagement with students they already have or how you can broker students into the opportunities that already exist.

What next

We really hope that you find these ideas useful and that they spark new thinking about how you can support an increase in participation in student opportunities within your union.

There is no right way to do anything, but keep developing your activity, innovate like it's going out of fashion and don't sit still. Constantly looking for new ways to attract and support

students will ultimately continue to bring you success.

Further information

This briefing was created following a Student Opportunities Lunch & Learn [webinar](#) that took place on 20th August 2013. The slides from this webinar are available on the Student Opportunities pages on NUS Connect.

If you'd like any further information about anything included in this guide please get in touch: fiona.ellison@nus.org.uk

Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB
t 0845 5210 262
f 020 7380 0794
e nusuk@nus.org.uk
www.nus.org.uk

nus
national union of **students**