

# 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.

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- 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 2<sup>nd</sup>/3<sup>rd</sup> 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

## 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.
- 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.

## Further reading

NUS [Mapping Participation](#) report (for more detail on this, have a look at the material from the Student Opportunities Lunch & Learn webinar, '[Deepening Participation](#)').

NUS [Success in the Student Market](#) report.

NUS-CBI [Working towards your future](#), employability report.

[Manifesto for Partnership](#) and [video](#).

Information about [widening participation and case studies](#) of unions' activities

NUS [briefing on retention/drop-out](#). (Contains information about clubs and societies.)

Guardian article written by a student about subject societies, '[Student societies: Standing Up for the Nerds](#)'.

Guardian article discussing extra- and co-curricular activities, with examples from societies, '[Students look to extra-curricular activities to give them employability](#)'.

## Further information

This briefing was created following a Student Opportunities Lunch & Learn webinar that took place on 15<sup>th</sup> 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 [Rosie Hunnam](#), Student Opportunities Co-ordinator at NUS.



# University of Exeter Guild of Students

## The idea

The overall vision within Activities & Volunteering is of a move towards an 'every student volunteers' aspiration. Every student will at some stage engage in some form of volunteering during their time at Exeter. This is bold, ambitious, aspirational and has the potential to be sector leading.

Students volunteer for a range of reasons:

- To give something back to the community and to make a difference
- To enhance their CV
- To develop skills and to gain experience
- To have a go at something that they've never been able to do before
- To follow their passions, hobbies, interests
- Because of a personal experience, experience within their family or their friendship group that has inspired them to volunteer

The Students' Guild Activities & Volunteering unit has committed to developing more and more ways to engage students in volunteering, accepting that one size doesn't fit all.

We have recently piloted a new way of engaging volunteers, where the volunteering opportunity sits within the academic College.

We have successfully piloted this type of volunteering in partnership with the English Department:

Care Homes Reading Project – this project sends volunteer student readers into care homes to read to older people

We have also set up:

- Maths Mentoring Project
- Writing Mentoring Project
- Theatre Buddy Scheme
- German, Spanish & French After School Club

We have learned a number of key things:

- That some students, who don't otherwise volunteer, will volunteer for subject based projects
- That providing quality training that is bespoke to the project makes it more successful and sustainable
- Once they have volunteered in this way, they also become more open to other types of volunteering
- That there is an interest amongst the subject disciplines within the University to develop volunteering
- That academic staff respond positively to the notion of student volunteering being of relevance to them

## Development stage

We ran focus groups with students and also approached academics and College Managers to find out if there was traction in the idea.

## Advice

Key ingredients are needed in order to establish success:

- Bespoke training for the project
- Strong links with the community partner
- Strong links with the academic discipline
- An academic champion who gives gravitas to the project (in particular we

- have been very successful in getting PGCE tutors support for the projects going in to schools)
- Built-in evaluation

## Indicators of success

Early days yet but we have had very positive feedback from students, community partners and academics.

We have done evaluations with those 3 key partners but the challenge is finding the time to evaluate robustly.

Now seeing a move to student societies wanting to set up their own volunteering schemes, e.g.:

- German, Spanish and French Societies all setting up after school language clubs
- Theatre Goers Society setting up the Theatre Buddy Scheme
- Maths Society setting up maths mentoring project
- Creative Writing Society setting up writing mentors project etc.

Hopefully it will become the norm at Exeter for societies to manage their own volunteering projects over time.

For more information please contact [Sara Bennett](#), Activities & Volunteering Manager.





# Leeds University Union

## About

This case study is centred on the work we have done to develop our academic/course based societies at the University of Leeds.

Our overall goal is for all schools at the University of Leeds to have a departmental society, and, ultimately, for all students to join their departmental society.

This case study shows how we have worked to integrate Departmental Societies within the Rep system, share best practice between societies, forge close links between societies and schools and ensure Departmental Societies are valued both within the Union and within their Department.

## The idea

Through the implementation of a new strategic plan the Union had a new focus on improving both the academic representation system and support given to departmental societies. This led to both of these roles being supported by the Student Engagement Coordinator and resulted in the departmental societies being given more support and understanding than they previously received as these groups rarely used the Union building due to carrying out a large number of activities in and around their School building.

Our idea was to link societies up with course and school reps so they could be involved in representation, as well as giving our representatives the chance to easily engage with a large audience within the School. We wanted to challenge the notion that academic societies were less relevant to the Union than other groups, as well as to challenge the idea

that their only function was to provide alcoholic events and nights out for a small group of students within a School.

## Development stage

We included Departmental/Academic Societies as a key part of our research into developing student engagement. Rather than having separate strands, where School and Course Reps deal with the University and societies provide socials, we decided to weave them together – recognising the mutual benefits they can provide each other and the different demographics they can intertwine.

In terms of research, we spent a lot of time discussing with representatives, School staff and societies in focus groups, and we looked for best practice internally at societies who already demonstrated best practice (including Law Society and the Biological Sciences society). Chances are in a given Union there is already at least one Departmental Society exhibiting best practice, so it's always best to replicate what already works. In the case of LUU, the successful system of combining academic representation and social activities through the society in the Medical School were used as a case study to replicate across the University.

## Advice

Whilst most groups are receptive, there were some who found the idea of being involved with representation, employability and "non-alcoholic" activities dull and irrelevant. There was also a degree of concern within some departments of allowing the societies to engage in more 'serious' activities within the School.

We utilised internal best practice, and have encouraged larger and successful societies to mentor and support small, new and struggling

societies to ensure they are able to develop and improve.

As with any group of societies, there have been instances where less engaged and interested committees can undo some work done by outstanding predecessors, but working closely with Schools and Representatives, as well as providing a high level of support and a comprehensive induction has nipped this in the bud in the majority of cases.

## Follow up

We currently have at least one Departmental Society in all Schools of the University, with 57 course based societies meaning all students in theory have a society relevant to their course of study.

This has been one of the drivers in membership, at the end of Freshers' Week 2013 we have 8,600 students enrolled in their Departmental Society, which represents just under one in three students. Whilst this is short of our long term target, it shows the societies are relevant and popular.

Almost all Course based societies have places on the Committee for their School Rep, and a seat at the Student Staff Forum for Society Presidents – this means they integrate with the representative system, and provide a link between the representational and social functions within the School.

We have also strongly encouraged societies to develop beyond being simply party-planners. Whilst this social element of the society is of fundamental importance, we have stressed the importance of allowing students to develop through the activities as well as 'have fun'. With this in mind societies have run a variety of activities from speakers events to careers

events, with groups also running national and international trips (The Physics Society taking 50 students to CERN being a highlight). Some societies also operate their Schools Peer Mentoring programme and play a key role in the marketing and recruitment activities of their School.

For more information please contact [Nick Scarlett](#), Student Engagement Co-ordinator.

To hear more about what Leeds students think of this new way of working, have a look at this fantastic [video](#) which explains their departmental societies and representation structure in more detail.

# University of Sussex Students' Union

## About

We wanted to help create a sense of community in our schools by building up and supporting our academic societies. We looked into what support our academic societies needed and overwhelmingly it was funding. We also wanted to encourage our academic societies to go beyond social events and create student-led academic events. To this end, the Education Officer met with every school and talked to our societies, and we have secured £7,300 of University funding for us to give to our academic societies.

## The idea

Our Activities Office currently spends £6,000 of a £13,000 societies' pot on academic societies, despite the fact that only 17 of our 147 societies are academic. Our academic societies still struggle with funding despite the fact that 12% of our societies get 46% of the funding. We wanted to strengthen the links with schools and ensure that every student at Sussex has access to an academic society for their discipline, and a source of funding to put on student led events.

## Development stages

The Education Officer met with every Head of School and Department Head, and discussed what support they currently offer their academic societies, and whether they would be willing to work with us to increase this support. The response was overwhelmingly positive, with schools keen to co-sponsor events and work together.

We also spoke to our academic societies about the support they needed, and whilst they mainly wanted funding, they also wanted more cohesive support and a clearer idea of how to go about getting speakers, organising trips etc.

Some ideas were then taken to the Pro-Vice Chancellor of Teaching and Learning, and she agreed to continue giving schools £2,000 for student engagement and give us £7,300 to improve how we resource our academic societies.

Getting that extra funding for academic societies reduced the competition for funds and freed up the societies pot for the remaining 130 societies, so with regards to increased student engagement everyone wins!

## Advice

If doing this again, we would have undertaken more external research so that we could get ideas from other SUs.

Have faith in your ideas! It seemed ambitious at first but actually everyone is really keen to get involved, which is exciting.

Also, ensure you involve everyone that any changes will affect in the planning conversations. The Activities Officer was a bit hesitant about adding to their staff's workload, but the staff were actually really keen to get involved.

Don't worry that you should be working on more hard-hitting policy work. Engaging with academic societies means we've really understood how important giving students the opportunities to lead their own learning are, and how crucial these students will be in any

conversations about the future of higher education.

### **Further Information**

Attached are notes from the Education Officer that she used to make the case for the funding.

If you want to find out more about this, please contact [Juliette Cule](#), Education Officer at the University of Sussex Students' Union.



## Academic Societies Proposal

Juliette Cule, Education Officer

The Students' Union are increasing our support our Academic Societies, as we believe belonging to an academic community is a key part of the University experience for students.

As part of this, we are asking that the University provide us with additional funding of at least £6,000 to better support our Academic Societies.

An Academic Society will be defined as a society with links to at least one school, and with a desire to host social and academic events.

### Background:

Currently, all schools except English and Education and Social Work have academic societies. These societies vary in their remit and function, but they all provide a place for students to meet peers from their school and engage in social and academic events. These societies are subsidiary groups of the Students' Union and it is up to the committee members to link up with their schools. We would like to play a greater role in facilitating academic societies to engage with more students and host a wider range of events.

We currently provide around £6,000 of funding for academic societies which is applied for by the societies from our societies fund of £13,000. This fund is accessible for all societies and is allocated by our Societies committee.

Each school has a fund of £2,000 which students can use to host events. The

awareness and usage of this is extremely variable, and it places the onus on the school to find and deploy resources (such as events organising, links with venues, technology and time) which the union already has.

This shows that overwhelming students come to us to host events, and see the union as a point of support for societies. For this reason we propose a change to how student-led academic events and societies are funded and supported.

### Vision:

We believe that the Union and the University should be empowering students to be active and engaged participants, as outlined in our vision:

'As a union we aim to be more than a purely representative body providing services. A students' union should be integral to all students' social lives, personal development and their educational experiences. Students should not be passive consumers but active participants providing services, experiences and complementary education for themselves. Together we will help to set the social agenda, ensuring that students are equipped and inspired to make a positive difference to their university experience and society.'

Academic societies could play a large role in enabling students to enhance their education, as well as providing a great link between the Union and Schools and encouraging students to celebrate their discipline and engage in interdisciplinary

events.

In the University's draft strategic plan, the university calls students co-creators of knowledge. We believe academic societies will empower students to feel confident in their own known and potential expertise and allow them to more fully engage with this concept. Much of a student's learning takes place outside the classroom, and this experience enables them to be more creative and confident in their academic work.

Academic societies can increase student engagement, retention and success by providing a platform for informal, safe, non-intimidating and student-led learning. We are happy to provide case studies and student opinions to back this up.

**societies, would you want to be involved in this?**

**Questions sent to Heads of Departments:**

**-Does your department allocate any money to academic societies?**

**- Do you have any examples of student-led events that your department have funded?**

**- What process does your department take to allocate this money?**

**- What societies do you feel are related to your department? Are there any groups which currently aren't societies but could become societies?**

**- For those departments who don't have societies, how could we help create societies?**

**- And finally if the Union created a new system to allocate funding to academic**



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