

# Starting new clubs and societies

## Supporting the creation of new clubs & societies

Clubs and societies span a vast array of interests and as student led provide a wonderful development opportunity for students. Supporting students to start and create their own club or society can be hugely empowering for the individual however getting the process right can be a challenge for students' union.

### Introduction

Ensuring that the process for creating new clubs and societies works for both students and the staff and officer team supporting them has been a challenge for some time.

Managing the need to maintain a level of control mixed with the need to make it as easy as possible for students' not to be put off by the process can be a hard line to judge.

In this guide we've pulled together a series of case studies that illustrate how other students' union manage their processes and how they got to that point.

Key things to think about in developing your process for supporting new clubs and societies are:

- Documentation – How much information do you need up front about the idea for the group? Do you help them formulate the idea or leave them to refine it themselves?
- Membership – Do they need to have a minimum number of interested students? If so how many? Or do you let them see if they can attract enough interest once they've got started?
- Approval process – Who has the say on whether a group can start or not? Is it a

student led process or does it involve your staff or officer team?

- Timing – How long does it take to get a group approved? Is there a quick turnaround or do you have set periods across the year that students can apply to start their group
- Resources – What do new clubs and societies get when they form? Do you have a set amount as a starter fund or do they have to go it alone to see what they can raise themselves?
- Capacity – Are there a finite number of clubs and societies that you can support through staff time or funding? If there is what do you do with the new ideas?

### Content

This document contains articles from:

- Northampton Students' Union
- Sheffield Students' Union

If you have any questions about this guide or would like to suggest any amendments please contact [fiona.ellison@nus.org.uk](mailto:fiona.ellison@nus.org.uk)

# University of Northampton Students' Union

## About

This study explains the process for setting up clubs and societies at the University of Northampton Students' Union. The process explains how we ensure all societies and sport clubs are student-led and unique through their aims and objectives, and that they are supported throughout their process of recruiting and setting up. This includes ensuring their knowledge of any legal requirement such as attending training, the importance of democratically run elections and how they can get accreditation for their volunteering.

## The idea

Two years ago, we had very few societies here in Northampton and the Students' Union was really keen on making sure we put in place a procedure that would increase this number.

We wanted to make sure we caught the students who had an idea and to encourage them to form a society and be affiliated with the Students' Union.

The key to this process was to keep things simple. This led to the "Five Simple Steps" plan that not only kept the process simple for students but also enabled us to easily administrate new societies as well as providing a personal interaction and support structure that was efficient and student-friendly.

There are five steps to our process:

**The BIG idea.** The student comes up with an idea for a society. It doesn't need to be

complicated, it doesn't need to reinvent the wheel, but it does need to be different to any currently existing society.

**Putting their thoughts to paper.** Our proposal form simply asks for the Name of the society, aims, objectives and intended activities as well as names of the committee members and at least five students who would be interested in joining such a society.

### Meeting the Societies & Volunteering

**Coordinator.** Once we have received a proposal form, we check that the names on the proposal form are all students and that they all agree to the society's formation and have an interest in joining the society.

We then set up a meeting with our Societies & Volunteering Coordinator. This is a short consultation meeting where we go through the proposed society's aims and objectives, activities and anything they need to know before they are affiliated with us.

**Get members to join!** After our initial meeting we set them up on our membership and finance systems followed by addition to our website so that they can encourage members to join their society online.

**Celebrate success!** We'll help the students get started with a new society grant to coordinate your first activity and a successful launch.

## Development stage

The Students' Union's first Societies & Volunteering Coordinator, Andrew Berrie came from a background of community fundraising and volunteering in Australia and knew from his previous experience that in order to prove effective: the process needed to be simple enough to be communicated in a single PowerPoint slide or in seconds at the Freshers Fair, not be time-exhaustive and as far as

possible be completed online for ease of access and to reduce office administration.

He researched the processes undertaken by various other Students' Unions, looking particularly at our Benchmarks, and ultimately designed a system and process that combined the best parts from a number of Unions that he felt would resonate with Northampton Students given a history of little activity.

We set the number of members required to just five, in order to ignite interest in society formation.

This was run alongside a promotional campaign Andrew designed called 'The Missing Soc' which invited students to provide contact details and a list of societies they wished existed on a sock shaped postcard. These were hung from a washing line in the Students' Union Building and responses collated. Where there were more than 5 students wanting a particular society, they would be contacted so that they might get in touch with one another.

## Advice

My advice to anyone who is struggling to engage with students is to think about how you can make the process of starting up new societies as simple as possible. You would also need to ensure that all students are aware of the fact that they can start up societies (in our case, with just four other students). We did a big push for our process last year for example, and now we have over 50 societies!

It's good to know that because we have a low number of students (five) required to start-up a new society; it's sometimes hard to get them to do more recruiting. Obviously, the more members a society has, the easier the word spreads. To get them to recruit and promote themselves by organising activities is the best

way to ensure they are going to be successful throughout their year and the following years too. This requires a lot of support to new societies sometimes but it's worth it for them to feel welcome and to ensure we give students the best experience they can have here.

It's also important to ensure that you sort out any issues or concerns at the initial meeting, and that the students are aware what meetings or training they need to attend in order to keep being affiliated with the Students' Union.

Don't be afraid to try something new and don't be afraid to admit that a current process or system isn't working. Denying a problem exists inhibits progress and improvement.

You need to ensure that changes are communicated clearly, concisely and thoroughly. With little to no activity in the first instance we were fortunate in not need to re-educate students in new processes, but we did need to educate students in how societies could form a part of University life. Integrated marketing and promotion of your service is integral to the success of any change.

Write a plan and evaluate how well it is working regularly. If you think you need help in order to achieve it, involve the relevant departments/Student Officers

## Impact

From September 2011 to July 2012, the roll out of the new processes and promotional campaign saw a 248% increase in the number of societies affiliated with the Students' Union.

Growth has continued, this September seeing a 173% increase in society memberships of that obtained in our first term under the new system.

It's a lot easier to keep track of new societies and to ensure that they are not only following the proper procedures we have here but are actually enhancing the student experience.

A number of questions are asked in the Students' Union's Annual SHAPE Survey to measure the impact society (and sporting) activity has for example 49% of our members believe it has enabled them to meet new people, 8% believes it helps them relieve stress.

## Contact

You can find more information about what happens at Northampton, including the proposal form here:

<http://www.northamptonunion.com/sports/starclub/>

For further information on this case study please contact Elina Svantesson, Societies and Volunteering Coordinator at University of Northampton Students' Union -

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# Sheffield University Union

## About

With an increasing number of applications to start a new society\*, with no extra staffing and increasing health and safety restrictions, we needed to develop a 'New Society' policy that achieved the following:

1. A fair and simple process; transparent, easily understood by students and accessible online.
2. Decision-making that was quick and met agreed turn-around times.
3. Societies Committee retained their constitutional right to approve or reject society applications.
4. Staff had the opportunity to provide necessary advice and guidance to Societies Committee based on an agreed list of issues.

Sports Club are the responsibility of the University but have adopted a similar (but adapted) process.

## The idea

Several years ago, the Activities & Sports Manager was concerned that potentially higher risk societies/ societies providing 'complex' activities, etc were being approved by Societies Committee, without consideration given to the availability of staff resources to support these student groups.

The Activities & Sports Manager felt that the department was not sufficiently well resourced to provide adequate health and safety advice and support to monitor compliance etc, for an unlimited number of societies which posed a

potential risk – and that restrictions therefore need to be applied.

If Societies Committee or other students felt that the SU should provide more opportunities to approve more societies then the democratic channels to campaign for additional resources for this area of student engagement would be open to them.

The system then in operation, only involved new society applications going straight to the Activities Officer and Societies Committee. Staff would sometimes find societies being approved that our insurers would not cover (which then made it a difficult process to reverse a decision to approve a new society) or that we could not manage safely without displacing other areas of work.

Initially, it was proposed (in a paper written by the Activities & Sports Manager) to Societies Committee, that they could not approve a new society unless the Manager or Society Development Coordinator was in agreement. This proposal was rejected by Societies Committee who produced an alternative policy paper, essentially arguing that it was their decision alone to approve or reject new societies - a right enshrined in the SU Constitution.

A meeting was then held, involving the Activities Officer and Manager, plus representatives from Societies Committee, so that we could each hear and understand the different perspectives.

A compromise was agreed:

1. Societies Committee would retain their right to approve or reject new society applications.
2. Societies Committee would consider the advice of staff on a specified list of criteria only (numbers 1-17 in the 'How-to-Set-Up-A-New-Society' document).

This list can be extended if there are any regulatory, insurance or similar changes which must be adhered to.

3. Staff would give no opinion on a list of other criteria decided by Societies Committee (numbers 18-22 in the 'How-to-Set-Up-A-New-Society' document – see below).
4. All new society applications would be received by the Officer, Committee and society staff (including the Manager) simultaneously; staff would provide written guidance to the Officer/Societies Committee with 5 working days. This period can be extended if an application requires further research or consultation with external agencies (although it rarely extended beyond 2-3 weeks).

All of the information and documents were made available online to ensure that students were fully aware, in advance of submitting an application, of what the process will entail. You can view them [online here](#).

Administrative support is also linked into the process to maintain accurate records of new society approvals, any restrictions etc.

Depending on the nature of the application, it is not unusual for a society to be approved but with certain restrictions applied (and agreed) in order to comply with our policy – i.e. there is some flexibility, in some instances.

## Development stage

The whole matter was initiated and resolved internally as it reflected Sheffield Union's governance systems and staff management of health and safety practice.

## Advice

What should have been done differently is for the Activities & Sports Manager to have had a

discussion with Societies Committee at the outset – to communicate the challenges for staff if too many high risk societies were approved – before writing a policy/ procedural document.

We feel that it is much easier to work within agreed guidelines and policies that have been approved by students, but which reflect operational and the constraints of staffing resources.

The 17 point criteria listed in the application process could benefit from an explanation of the reason it is included; this could then allow students to challenge those criteria they considered to be unfair or unreasonable.

Other changes introduced, relating to students starting a new society, are:-

(i) to remove a minimum number of 'start-up' members, beyond the 3 key office-holder positions (President/Secretary and Treasurer), required before an application can be submitted. All proposals are effectively considered on the merit of the idea; the successful ones will grow and be sustainable!

This decision definitely opened up more opportunities for students to start their own society.

(ii) introduced a new society 'meet and greet' initiative, where society support staff arrange an informal meeting to make the new society aware of the staff support they can receive, and put names to faces etc.

(iii) Societies Committee have created 2 new elected positions whose roles are dedicated to supporting and liaising with students, before, during and after the application process.

Both (ii) and (iii) have increased the retention and sustainability of new societies (we now have 279!).

## Impact

The changes have worked very well since their introduction. There have been no instances where Societies Committee has rejected the advice of staff, and this is an area of work that is prioritised to ensure that the process is quick and responsive to students.

Because several of the restricted criteria can be subjective, the process does, therefore rely on trust between staff and elected students. The starting point for any staff advice is to aim to approve a new society unless there are significant reasons why approval would cause potential problems.

We monitor the number of rejected societies and report on the reasons for the rejections.

Life is definitely a lot easier! And we got an extra staff post last year in order to increase the number of societies that can be approved and supported by staff!

## Contact

For more information about this case study please contact Kathryne Fraser, Activities and Sports Manager at Sheffield University Union - [k.fraser@sheffield.ac.uk](mailto:k.fraser@sheffield.ac.uk) or 0114 222 8520

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