Showcasing your impact

The benefits of student opportunities

Students' union often claim that student opportunities are great for student development, retention or engagement. However there often isn't evidence to back these claims up. This briefing aims to provide you with ideas and information about how to measure your impact and what to do once you know how great your service provision is.

What is impact?

'Impact' can be explained as the measurable changes resulting from activity. It is different to 'outputs'. They are the services and products you deliver.

For example:
Activity: Your team design and implement campaign to increase participation in societies

Output: Posters explaining benefit of societies, January 'welcome back' fair where students can sign up to societies, social media campaign explaining how easy it is to join societies.

Impact: English society, Harry Potter society and Yoga society gain new members. Students report a greater sense of belonging to the institution.

It's important to consider:
- Intended impact(s)
- Unintended impact(s)
- Positive impact(s)
- Negative impact(s)
- Short-term impact(s)
- Long-term impact(s)

Why is it important to understand impact?

Funding

NUS are often asked about what students' union can do to increase funding for student opportunities. Being able to demonstrate the impact of the work that you currently do is valuable when asking for funding.

Depending on the purpose of the funding you will need to demonstrate different impacts, for example:
- Participation numbers
- Skills gained or improved by students involved
- Students' feelings towards the project or activity
- Visual evidence (not always essential but can make your funding application stand out)

You may already have been granted funding and are required to report on the impact of the funding.

Trend analysis

Understanding impact can help you to identify trends in student opportunities. Essentially this is about understanding the change in popularity of types of societies, perhaps a shift in the types of students engaging with your sports clubs and event the different funding sources your clubs access.

Having impact measurement processes in place will additionally mean that you can compare

nus

national union of students

local, national, even global trends to your own statistics. This is useful if you are placed above average as you can use this evidence as a measure of success, however if you are working below average you can use this as a reason for increased funding.

Evaluation

Evaluating your impact is essential for being accountable. Without an understanding of the impact you are having, you will only be able to communicate *what* activity you have been doing, not the effect that it has had.

Being able to properly evaluate a programme, using data collected throughout the academic year, rather than in a mad scramble at the end, will ensure you're able to carry out a full evaluation.

Evaluation, utilising impact measurement tools, will enable you to fully understand the areas of strength and weakness within your service provision and help you to identify key areas for change and development.

Service provision & money allocation

Are you allocating resources in the areas that make the most positive change? Could you change the services that you provide to solve a problem?

Understanding the impact that your student opportunity provision makes and having relevant data to evaluate will allow you to be more strategic in your work and allow you to put funding into the right areas. It is also useful as a lobbying tool, for example if you're trying to convince your institution that you need more access to rooms on campus, you could use data showing the number of students participating and how often they are doing so.

Knowing detail about your impact can be developed through many forms from wholesale evaluation on money spent across the organisation to individual project impact and will be appropriate for different audiences.

Understanding what you want to showcase is key to then developing a mechanism to evaluate and demonstrate impact.

How to develop and capture information

Being aware of how to capture information and the different data that each mechanism provides is important to being able to get a full picture of the impact of your opportunities.

Options for data capture include:

Surveys

There will already be a plethora of data ready to be analysed and used in the results of existing surveys. These may be surveys conducted already by your students' union, your institution, or even national surveys such as NSS.

If there's something missing you could design a survey to capture the information that you need. NUS Research team can help you if you need support in survey design.

Focus groups

An interesting way to collect (largely qualitative) data is to organise focus groups of a small number of students. Remember to consider which students you need to talk to, and what questions you will ask.

This will help you get some really rich data that will help you ascertain thoughts and feelings of individuals. It's also a great opportunity for you to test our your assumptions and ideas – what works and doesn't work within your service provision.

Interviews

Similar to focus groups, but normally with just one or two students, you can collect good qualitative data. Interviews are particularly useful if conducted at the start and end of a project or activity as you can measure through appropriate questioning, the specific impact of the project on the individual.

nus
national union of **students**

You can use measurement scales to assess whether individuals perceive their skills have changed, or whether they felt comfortable in engaging in the activity. All of this will help you build a picture of your service provision.

Photo/video
Collect high-quality photos, as well as video, to create great visual evidence of events. You will be able to use these when communicating your successes and achievements, either as evidence alone or to support written data.

Databases/spreadsheets
For recording numbers of participating students, number of clubs and societies, characteristics of students, databases/spreadsheets/forms are essential.

Ensure your system for recording such information is fit for purpose. Read the briefing from the NUS 'Breaking through Bureaucracy' webinar for advice on creating more efficient systems.

Having strong databases/spreadsheets will allow you to manipulate data – comparing a number of fields with each other so you can look for things like particular peaks of engagement by mature students, or where you've got lots of women on geography courses undertaking activity

Social media
Data is often captured for you on social media platforms and can provide interesting analysis, too.

Facebook has 'Insights' for page managers, which includes the popularity of posts, the number of visits, and the characteristics of the people engaging with the page. It monitors this data all the time and is always up to date.

There are a few different ways of capturing data from Twitter. You can simply record the number of 'Retweets' or 'mentions' you have, or even just monitor number of followers. Also, you could use a # to record what people are saying about a topic. For example if you set-up

a # for your Freshers' Fayre you could monitor feedback, comments and ideas. You can use software such as Storify to turn tweets, and other social media into a 'Story', a record of interactions about a topic.

Practicalities of data capture

There are some key things you need to consider when looking at what the best data capture mechanism is for you.

- **All the time** - capture information all year, not just at time of need. Data will be richer and more useful.
- **Quantitative & qualitative** – a combination of both will work best to demonstrate the impact that you have.
- **Make a plan** - random data collection is less useful than structured, longer-term collection. Data capture should be designed to serve a purpose. It is useful to match the data that you collect to the objectives of your strategic planning.
- **Make it easy** – design systems to capture data automatically. Can you re-design current systems to do this? It doesn't have to cost money as you can use what you already have. For example you can monitor participant numbers recorded through membership databases/existing surveys.

Ideas for capturing data

Here are some practical tips for you to consider in capturing information for your student opportunity provision.

- Design an event review process for clubs and societies that includes attendee numbers, a high-quality photograph, and key highlights of event.
- Commission your photography/media society or student media group to photograph, film or record events. Make this a condition of grant funding.
- Meet with your institution and offer to share data
- When changing the service you provide or introducing new services, identify and record key statistics before, and identify the best time to collect the

nus
national union of **students**

same statistics after. This will give you quality data about the impact of that particular change.

- Create a data recording and analysis project for a student group, student staff, or a paid intern. It is an interesting project students to get involved in.

Designing mechanisms to capture data, understanding why you're capturing the data and then knowing how you're going to analyse the information is key to having a successful impact framework.

Delving deeper into impact

Your audience will often dictate how you capture your data and how in depth and thorough the analysis is.

We've talked already about options for data capture that you may already be using or be familiar with.

However if you're interested in exploring your impact in more depth we'd suggest that you look at our Impact Guide. There are two parts to our Impact Guide:

- Impact Workbook
- Impact Reference Guide

We'll shortly be releasing more information about how to use the guide and toolkit but they provide a good basis for you to start developing a robust programme of impact measurement.

There are three key fundamental features behind the toolkit:

- **Stakeholders are central –** The analysis focuses on the people who are important to an organisation – the stakeholders, and therefore the ones who will be impacted as a result of that activity
- **Theory of change** – Integral to the toolkit is understanding how the work you do created impact – essentially the result of change.
- **Transparency** – Ensuring that the process you put in place is open to scrutiny and that you challenge your assumptions and decisions to enable

your findings to be more credible with your audience.

The toolkit takes you through a five stage process that helps you develop an impact map which tracks progress from you inputs through activities, outputs and outcomes.
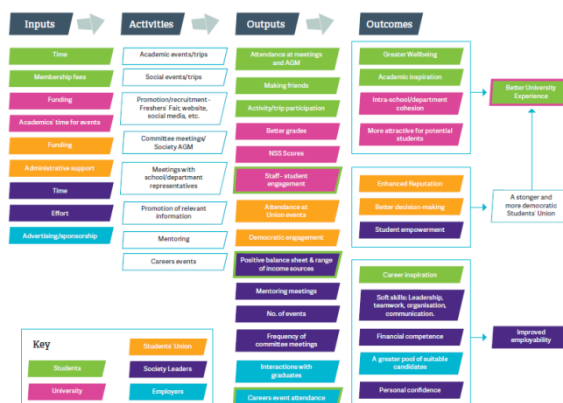
This impact map enables you to take into account all the different elements that result in measurable outcomes from your activities.

Showcasing your impact

Showcasing your impact shouldn't just be for funding every few years – it needs to become an essential part of your evaluation process

Essentially showcasing impact is about:

- Having good data and information
- Communicating it in the best way possible

When communicating your impact you need to:

- Embed a culture of communicating impact – make sure it's part of everybody's
- Make it regular – book in time every week (or month) to share key impacts
- Make it meaningful and relevant – tell your audience about impacts that are relevant to them and make sure the data is interesting.

There are a whole host of ways that you can showcase your impact

- **Impact reports** – these are *one* way of showcasing your impact but should not be the only way!

nus
national union of students

- **Physical displays** – How can you utilise wall space within the students' union to show off your key highlights from the last year
- **Officer reports** – make them interesting, include pictures, video, and focus on evidence and data. People will care more about impact than how you got there.
- **Press releases** – communicate your impact to the local community and to wider audiences, make sure it's relevant to the audience. How have you benefited them
- **Blogs** – these work best if focused on one topic or activity, rather than a longer post about *all* impacts. Make sure you keep updating the blog regularly otherwise it will become defunct.
- **Social media** – how you can tweet or facebook your key achievements? Posts accompanied with pictures or video are much more effective
- **SU website** – make your impact clear on multiple pages of your website, on your join a new society page what stats and stories do you have to back up your case for a great experience?
- **Infographics** – great way to present lots of stats and information in a visual way, theses can contain just a few stats or a wealth of information.

You can see some great examples of how other organisations showcase their impact:
- Volunteer Match
- The Dogs Trust
- NCVO Almanac
- Charity Water
- Newcastle SU annual report

Comparing yourself to others

There are lots of data sources out there that you can utilise to provide external evidence for your impact, or that you can use to compare your activity to that of other institutions.

NUS information
NUS annually produces reports into the student movement – this year, we've pulled out specific

information in order to help inform students' unions better about specific work.

One briefing on drop-out helps unions use data to better understand the nature of drop-out at their institution and how they might put in place strategies working with their universities to slow down the rate of drop-out. The webinar looked specifically at the link between how much a students' union gets in terms of block grant compared to different types of university, how much they spend on clubs and societies and how many students drop-out. We spent time looking at making the case for increased investment and showed students' unions how to use the data to their benefit.

You can find data sets to analyse the information here:
- Membership data
- Drop-out rates and retention

A full briefing looking at the topics covered in the webinar will be released shortly.

In addition NUS has other research that may well be of interest to you:
- Mapping participation
- Success in the student market

External information
There is lots of studies, research pieces, data sets that exist that you can use to either benchmark yourself against or use to provide additional evidence behind your impact.

We've started to pull some of these together for you:
- **NCVO data store** with a host of stats and reports relating to the voluntary sector
- **Cabinet Office** – Community Life Survey has lots of information about community engagement and social action
- **BUCS** – Value of sport research looking at the role sport plays in making students more employable
- **NCVYS** – Youth Sector report, lots of key stats and figures of issues that young people are facing

national union of students

- **State of student activities** – A survey by Teesside SU on the staffing levels and support provided to student activities departments.
- **EFDS –** Disabled peoples lifestyle survey contains lots of information about disabled peoples engagement in sport and preferences for activity.
- **vInspired** – Bursting the bubble report on scope of student volunteering and impact of volunteering on students
- Literature review off studies that consider student retention

If you have other reports that would be of interest to students union please do highlight them here.

If you have any further questions please get in touch fiona.ellison@nus.org.uk

nus
national union of **students**