

Developing Academic Societies

Supporting and developing academic societies

In 2013 NUS released a briefing about creating and supporting academic societies. This briefing follows on from that and has been produced by NUS and TSEP (The Student Engagement Partnership) to share new ideas about academic societies.

Introduction

Where student voice and student opportunities collide – this briefing will share ways that students' unions are developing academic societies. The role and importance of induction, the academic community and students in positions of 'power' on creating a culture where students belong, fostering an environment conducive to retention and achievement. We'll also discuss the role of academic societies in bridging the 'gap' between representation and social activities and discuss the power of and opportunities created by having thriving academic societies.

Academic societies are a great place to start developing your Student Opportunities. Structures are usually in place within your institution that you can emulate, or at least, work with, to develop your societies. If you wanted to create more societies, you could look at which courses or academic schools, don't have a society. If you already have a society for each course/school/department, you could use good ideas from the successful societies to help those that need to improve.

Whilst your hobby or interest societies will probably only focus on that as their main activity, academic societies are able to provide diverse activities for their members; the

common factor for them is their interest in the subject, and so this can be used as the unique selling point for the society. Socials, trips and projects can all be linked back to their point of interest.

As the ['what works'](#) research tells us, students are markedly more likely to feel like they 'belong' at an institution if they can engage with their peers in an academic environment. The interesting potential subtext here is that students who recognise that their involvement with their academic society is via their SU could develop their sense of belonging not only to your institutions, but also your unions.

More interesting than that is the opportunity you create by 'owning' and running these academic societies, is the chance to blend these overtly academic social bodies with your representation systems. Societies are large groups of students communicating openly about their course/institution – these are the environments and communities that rep coordinators have been dreaming of cultivating through rep and committee structures for years. This is a chance to explore the possibilities of blending the two together and looking more holistically at student engagement and how you use single mechanisms to engage multiple purposes.

We often discuss the impacts of our unions. Research demonstrates that a sense of belonging impacts on the retention and success of students – therefore you might, with the right mechanisms and metrics in place, start to significantly demonstrate impact in a way that has not been possible before.

Academic societies and belonging

The underlying premise is that every student will develop a sense of belonging to their institution based on a number of driving factors, and this is different for every student. This sense of belonging will be fluid - different interactions a student has will affect their sense of belonging either positively, negatively or neutrally. The best way of affecting student's sense of belonging is through engagement with overtly academic environments. The hard and fast reason why belonging matters – it affects the retention and success of students.

Students are more likely to develop a sense of belonging if the activity and academic environment they engage with is of a mainstream nature, e.g. if there aren't any stigmas attached to the activity they undertake, if it is 'popular' or ordinary with neutral consequences for involvement. This is an interesting point that can be translated to other societies or students groups to develop belonging.

The keys to nurturing belonging are as follows;

1. Supportive peer relations
2. Meaningful interaction between staff and students
3. Developing knowledge, confidence and identity as successful HE learners
4. A Higher Education experience that is relevant to interests and future goals

Trying to embed these in your academic societies and or other student group activity will increase your chances of developing cultures where belonging naturally occurs.

Representation

We've noticed that more students' unions are considering how societies blend with your representative structures. We've generated some questions for you to consider in this area: Are their areas you could replace with society activity? Might you create a hybrid society/rep structure? Could you educate society leaders on the importance of their role and transfer of information? Might you create positions in leadership groups of society execs? Could you encourage reps to attend society events? Could you give free membership to reps as a 'reward' for their role? Could you break the boundaries of how representation is perceived altogether and challenge the current principles of how and why certain mechanisms are used to deliver representation?

If anyone wants to discuss this area specifically in more detail then please get in touch with [Andy Speed](#) directly.

Case studies

This briefing contains ideas and information from:

- University of Nottingham Students' Union
- De Montfort Students' Union

This guidance was written following a [Student Opportunities](#) and [TSEP \(The Student Engagement Partnership\)](#) Lunch & Learn webinar that took place in October 2015. All information was correct at time of publication, but is subject to change over time.

If you have any questions about this guide or would like to suggest any amendments please

contact [Rosie Soffe](#), Union Development Co-ordinator at NUS.

University of Nottingham Students' Union

Here at UoNSU, we have a huge number of societies located across three main campuses, and several medical sites. Each different type of society has a member of staff responsible for supporting and developing those groups. We currently have 64 societies that are academic course-related (along with another 12 that are specifically focussed on careers), which all have their own agendas and different plans for the year. My role was introduced just under two years ago to help develop these groups so that they were undertaking a wide range of activities and not just focusing on one area, such as socials.

Development stage

I spent a lot of time talking to our groups and finding out about the sorts of events that they were already doing, and then using things I'd learned from one group to suggest as examples to others as a way they could expand their activities.

Many groups were involved or interested in some form of peer mentoring schemes, which were operating with varied levels of effectiveness. Over the past year, the University has introduced a requirement for all Schools to have some form of peer mentoring in operation for new students – this provided a great opportunity to encourage societies to work with their Schools collaboratively to deliver a better scheme. One of the main hurdles groups had to overcome was around the administration of schemes (matching mentors and mentees can be a huge job,

especially if you want to match them on something like interests rather than tutor groups). Likewise, Schools often struggled to engage with recruiting mentors and encouraging mentees to attend. Bringing societies and schools together has so far resulted in mutual benefit for both, and especially for the new students who have a much better initial experience of University.

Employability is a hot topic for societies here, especially as many committee members are in their final year and worried about getting a job themselves! If they can make links with some destination employers for their subject area, it is beneficial both for the individuals on the committee and the society as a whole. We try and encourage a collaborative relationship with the University's Careers & Employability Service, so that events are held to a high standard and there is a wide variety on offer.

I'm strongly in favour of encouraging a greater working relationship between course-based societies and their Schools. The strongest groups I work with all have a great relationship with School leaders, and it can help on a variety of levels – from access to further funding, to admin support for an event, to arranging lectures on extra-curricular topics that society members may find interesting but aren't covered as part of the course.

One problem we haven't yet overcome is encouraging links to academic representation channels, such as Course Reps. My ideal situation would be for societies to give Course Reps a platform at society events to remind students to bring any course feedback to them – for example, introducing the Course Rep during a break in a pub quiz.

Our IMS (Intra-Mural Sport) leagues at Nottingham are hugely successful. We currently have 246 teams from 110 different student

groups, and I'd estimate that half of these are course-based societies, which reinforces the overall concept of 'belonging' as it shows that students are keen to take part in events with those people they are most familiar with, the ones they see every day.

Welfare is a growing aspect that more and more student groups are trying to get involved in, and our course-based groups are coming up with some great ideas to support this. In particular, our Law Society ran a 'Wellness Week' of activities a couple of weeks before summer exams, to help students de-stress and get themselves away from the books for a brief period of time. They held activities like cake decorating, a morning rave (with free tea and smoothies) and a Puppy Room, which raised over £6000 for Guide Dogs.

Learning from our Experience

Many societies here in Nottingham are keen to show how fantastic they are, so introducing a bit of competition throughout the year is a good way to try and get the most out of them. Last year, we introduced a points system to decide which of our societies gained Gold or Silver status (Bronze is the basic status for groups that have completed their required training/paperwork), and it was hugely successful. Groups had to undertake a range of different activities to gain points, and they had to gain a certain number of points in different categories.

We have over 200 active societies, and managed to get 119 of these engaged with trying to push on from Bronze status – this was a huge success. In particular, many of the course-based groups were keen to amass the highest total as they consider themselves among the best societies at UoNSU. You can find out more about our points scheme [here](#).

After the first year of the system, we've reviewed it to think about other areas we'd like groups to develop, and will keep reviewing each year to ensure the system is as appealing as possible for groups to participate in. I'd suggest that anyone looking to implement a points system takes a look at ours and at other SUs to see what sort of things you're incentivising groups to do. A big thing to consider is when you want groups to claim their points and how this will happen – we have two points 'windows' which are the only times groups can claim points, so we aren't having to administer a scheme all year round!

I'd encourage building up links with key staff in different University Schools and Departments, and making sure you encourage course-based groups in these areas to liaise with the School contact where possible. Some of the groups I work with have persuaded the School to sponsor the society by paying the membership fees for all the students on that course, in return for putting on activities that are aimed at all these students. This could be specifically because the group are doing something like a peer mentoring activity which obviously helps the School deliver its obligations to the University, or it could simply be ensuring all students on the course are invited to social activities which help them feel more at home and part of the course. Sometimes this can present issues when you have a weaker committee that isn't maintaining this relationship adequately, but that's when I will intervene if necessary to help support both sides to move forward in a positive fashion. The vast majority of relationships, however, have been overwhelmingly positive and resulted in benefits to both sides.

My last suggestion would be to use social media to engage with committee members as widely as possible. I created a work Facebook profile, and it has been instrumental in building up a

great rapport with groups. Many students that I had previously struggled to engage with using email have become significantly more responsive due to my use of Facebook, and a private group for the Presidents of the groups I work with.

Impact

It's easy to see from the increased membership figures, increased engagement with Union initiatives (such as the points system, funding opportunities, turnout in Student Leader Elections) that the work we're doing with our societies is working. In some ways, we've been too successful – many of our societies are so engaged with us now, which sometimes presents a challenge to give everyone the same level of service. However, this is a positive problem we're more than happy to have, as it shows our groups really want to be the best they can be. Particularly with course-based groups, we are hearing more and more positive comments and praise from Schools across the University around the work these societies are doing, even expanding into areas like working with Widening Participation teams in local schools.

Contact

For more information please contact [Andy O'Hara](#), Societies Development Co-ordinator (Course & Career groups).

De Montfort Students' Union

The Games Development Society are a new academic society that formed in summer of 2015. They held an event for returning students the week before term started that was a 'Games Jam' working with their lecturer. Following the success of this event it has been included in the course's structured

Enhancement Week plans and essentially been made part of the course due to the influence of the society.

The following text has been provided by Sean Gorman, Games Development Society Chair (black), and Dan Tinkler, Volunteer & Societies Coordinator (blue).

Development stage

The idea was to establish a network, where the society can easily connect with multi-disciplinary students from all across the university, particularly those interested in the video games development industry. Graduates across the UK are struggling to find work and some employers feel that graduates applying for junior positions are not industry ready. Therefore the Games Development Society was set up to act as a way into working experience, to learn from other courses how their process fits the games development pipeline, offer workshops to teach others how to better their skills and understanding, all to ultimately improve chances of our members finding a job within the industry.

After attending Euro Gamer Expo (EGX) Rezzed in London 2015, I returned to University with the goal of creating a piece of work that could be presented at an exhibition or conference similar to EGX. Universities were also there; boasting the work their students were producing. I wanted to tell these students that 'there is the goal, we can do it', after seeing work like Beyond Eyes; an Indie game that started as a degree project, before Microsoft offered their support to the young developer. The Games Industry is booming, we are all creators, and I wanted to get myself, my friends and my University involved.

It was not smooth and issues did arise. The main issue first being: I didn't know anyone

outside of my own course studying for a game related degree. As the Games Art course at DMU is at risk of being isolated from the rest of the University, students have no connection with Computer Games Programming or other respective courses. Artists and Programmers in industry work almost side by side, it was an obstacle I wanted to overcome so that when students graduate they understand how to communicate with different areas of the games industry.

Advice

You need a team behind the society that are passionate, that understand and believe in its values and goals. Communication is key here. I assembled a team of people who I knew were dedicated to the position, wanted to achieve something, who were approachable, who could communicate well.

From the groups formation we encouraged them to work with their lecturers closely. We have been fortunate enough that in this case the Game Art and Development lecturers have been receptive and understood the need where the link has been made by the society. Understanding an open dialogue between society committees and academic staff on aims can be a key area for supporting the development of academic groups. Like many other academic societies we saw that committee members were also course reps and on this occasion it has been beneficial with the two being approached together rather than to be treated as separate entities.

Impact

The Games Development Society has afforded me an incredible amount of opportunities; networking opportunities, job opportunities etc. We've been approached by several companies, asking whether we knew anyone in our society who could fill a position. I have had the chance

to work on two undisclosed IPs (intellectual properties) since I started the society, as employers know its value. I wouldn't say it has made my life easier, that wouldn't be any fun at all. Our team has worked hard to guarantee that the society is functioning properly, which is how we have earned such credit. Nothing gained, is easy.

We measured the impact of the society by the attendance at our events mostly, the last event we hosted we had well over 100 attendees, and the last Games Jam we hosted we had well over 40 people taking part. The fact that staff and now the University are starting to take notice too is a great achievement. But we're not done yet. We have a lot more plans, bigger goals and a lot more ambition.

While the full extent of this impact is still to be fully developed we have already seen that the society has given the students links into the gaming industry and brought together students who had previously been fairly isolated giving them the chance to further develop their skills as developers creating a stronger student experience. The key element has been seen as how the society has had an impact on the course leaders that has traditionally been reserved for Course Reps. DSU will be further investigating using this approach with academic societies and how to bridge the gaps with course reps creating a larger platform for our students to develop a greater student experience and creating stronger links with the student voice department in day to day practices.

Contact

For more information please contact [Dan Tinkler](#), Volunteer & Societies Coordinator.

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