

Overcoming barriers

Tackling Lad Culture can be difficult as the task involves challenging some deeply embedded, beliefs, behaviours and structures on campus and within wider-society. That's why we've created this briefing that covers some examples of common arguments and barriers that you may come against and advice from pilot unions for overcoming them.

People don't think lad culture exists here

There could be differing levels of dominance for 'lad culture' in different institutions but it would be dangerous to assume it's not an issue at your union/institution. Our research showed in addition to the big, obvious ways that 'lad culture' manifests itself, that there are also many ways which may not be visible to everyone, but which are still affecting women students' lives. For instance, online 'banter' sites, the disdain with which women's and feminist issues are treated in class discussions, and advertising from external club nights are all issues raised by our research which might not be immediately obvious to unions or institutions.

'Lad culture' is a wider cultural phenomenon which is probably present to some degree in every student community in the country. As sexism, racism, heterosexism and ableism are societal problems and students are part of society, our research indicates that it is unlikely that one institution would be totally free from the problems which have been so commonly identified. This is an issue which the UK government and Universities UK acknowledge is a problem in universities right across the UK

and that all universities have a responsibility to address.

If you are not sure if lad culture is a problem for your students, it may be a good idea to conduct some research with your members to find out about their experiences and see if the lad culture tools we provide can help you gain a deeper understanding of the challenges your students may experience in relation to lad culture.

"We found that by sharing stories and quotes from students who experienced exclusion as a result of lad culture, it helped to demonstrate the impact, educate students about it and show students that they weren't alone if it happened to them."
– Queen Mary Students' Union

People think lad culture is 'anti-men'

Lad culture was defined in the 'That's What She Said' research as 'a group or 'pack' mentality residing in activities such as sport and heavy alcohol consumption, and 'banter' which was often sexist, misogynist, racist and homophobic. It is also thought to be a sexualised culture which involved the objectification of women and rape supportive

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nus
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attitudes, and occasionally spilled over into sexual harassment and violence.'

The research makes it quite clear that 'lad culture' is not about all men, nor is it only about men, nor is it about a group of easily-identifiable 'lads', and this is a view that NUS subscribes to. What we are talking about is a culture, with values that are problematic and at odds with the values of the student movement.

"You don't have to get caught up in the name, you can call it something else if you need to. What's most important is that you are able to achieve the aims and outcomes that challenge the values, attitudes and behaviours that create lad culture."
– Queen Mary's Students' Union

This is a culture that we've probably all participated in at some point or another and that it's quite common for people to dip in and out of. We are absolutely not demonising men or saying that women can't also participate in 'lad culture' – the research clearly shows that they can, but this doesn't make 'lad culture' unproblematic.

Wanting to challenge sexism and misogyny is not 'anti men' but is about wanting to create a better environment for all your students, including men. Lad culture and compulsory hyper masculinity itself has many harmful effects on men, especially for LGBT+, disabled and black men. Lad culture as a term is used to reflect the privileging of hyper-masculinity at the expense of those students who do not conform to the sexist and homophobic standards the culture demands.

"At Cardiff, to stop the name from shutting down conversations we have purposefully not used the word but our strategy seeks to tackle the behaviours and culture that the term describes. The It's No Joke campaign is not targeted at one group of people, it is a campus-wide campaign directed at everyone in our educational community." – Cardiff University Students' Union

Not having enough funding

Not all unions and institutions do have additional money to fund new activities. However, this may be down to a case of reprioritising where funding is going, or that work that is already happening incorporates initiatives that tackle lad culture. For example, if you already resource training for all course representative, you could use part of the session to focus on how course reps can challenge derogatory language in the classroom.

Taking responsibility for the campus culture environment does not have to cost students' unions and institutions a lot of money. While it can be challenging to try to change behaviours which have been normalised, you can work to improve campus culture in ways that are not expensive. Some of the ways in which students' unions have been working to challenge lad culture and improve the campus environment are through changing policies and procedures, providing training for bar staff, running workshops with students and staff and giving students the space to understand lad culture and discuss more positive alternative behaviours (for example working in partnership with society presidents or sports presidents). Obviously if you have funding you can do more to promote your work to students, but this is not a prerequisite to make the student experience better for your students.

"Using current resources you can do campaigns on a shoe string. By focusing on the impact and being creative (for example QMTV producing videos about lad culture) and tapping into resources you already have. We applied to the campus community fund and secured £600 funding from our Library café to purchase rainbow laces for our sports teams to show solidarity with LGBT+ students." – Queen Mary's Students' Union

Reaching those who are not already convinced

One of the important things about tackling lad culture work is that it is not simply about pointing fingers and identifying people to blame, but is about educating our members about the impact of cultural norms and behaviours and encouraging responsible behaviours which create a more inclusive environment for all students instead of an environment which comes at the expense of some students. By embedding work to tackle lad culture into the ways in which your union works and promoting a more positive set of behaviours you can reach far beyond the 'converted'.

If lad culture is only tackled in a tokenistic way that doesn't work to engage with all students then there is a risk of this, however the progress that is taking place in students' unions is working precisely because it is reflecting a cultural change in the way in which unions engage with their students at all levels. This is one of the reasons that lad culture work was prioritised as an issue for the whole of NUS, not just the women's campaign. Although the women's campaign has always been driving the work of the campaign, support and buy in from the whole union is key. Providing leadership for the whole union to get engaged with the issue is important to ensure lad culture is not simply seen as a niche issue.

"We have built it into the existing training that we give to halls committees and sports club captains that we do at the start of the year sections on lad culture and sexual harassment. Through this we give them information on how to identify sexual harassment, the Students' Unions zero tolerance stance and how to report it properly. As students were new into their elected positions and expected to receive a whole day's training we found this works well as students came in optimistic about the whole day rather than just isolating it as an individual training need."
– London School of Economics Students' Union

Keeping work going after a Sabbatical Officer has left

There are many student officers doing excellent work on tackling lad culture on a one-year basis or even voluntary basis, however if you want to affect cultural change you should aim to embed this throughout the wider work and priorities of the Union. This means that you could make sure that the work is built into the organisations strategy which influences union staff work plans and departmental objectives as well as student officer manifestos. By doing this you can ensure that work doesn't disappear with the officer who took a lead on it and that future officers can continue the work in future years with the support of staff.

"In the past there has been work undertaken but as officers and staff have left this work has not really been taken forward. This is one of the main reasons why it was important for us to bring people together to create a long term vision and plan for how we will tackle this. We can then outline who will be responsible to what areas, when we plan to deliver it and how we can measure the impact of the work that happens as we progress." – Queen Mary's Students' Union

Trying to make nightlife spaces safe

As a students' union you are responsible for ensuring that your members can access the spaces that you offer. If your students do not feel comfortable in your spaces, it is important to find out why, draw on NUS research and resources and think creatively about ways in which you can improve those spaces and communicate to your members that you are doing this. This may involve having to rethink the way you brand your events and what events you choose to run. If you are going to do this, it is best to ensure that you bring together your women's officer and liberation groups and the people responsible for your events and commercial activities in those discussions about how you make your events better for everyone. You can decide how your

events are run and how best to take into account the needs of more of your student groups, not only the ones currently being served by the opportunities offered.

“We rebranded our weekly sports night and Friday club night under the theme of ‘call it out’. We really invested in getting our Athletics Union Executive and key members of the Athletics Union involved in our work on this to ensure they fully supported it. We changed the bar staff uniforms to promote ‘call it out’ all spaces where physically branded with ‘call it out’ and influential members of the student community gave out stickers, lanyards and business card sized flyers with reporting information on. Taking over our regular nights was a great way to improve the perception of those regular in attendance that this was not only a priority for the Union officers but also those key in LSESU Sport. The physical branding still remains and we hope that those put off attending on other days will see the union’s stance on the issue regardless of night or occasion.” - LSESU

Tackling the heavy drinking culture

One of the great things about students’ unions is that they provide the space for students to come together, belong to a group, make new friends and get involved in things they perhaps wouldn’t otherwise. That sense of belonging that people get from being involved in their students’ union is an important part of the student experience and it is right for students’ unions to nurture that. However, the challenge arises when the perception that the only way (of one of the main ways) to belong is to partake in the heavy drinking culture that may exist. Many students do enjoy the social effects of alcohol which in itself it not a problem, and students can make that decision for themselves if they want to drink. However, students are also influenced by the expected norms around drinking and as a students’ union you should reflect on whether the way in which events are organised sets an expectation that students

need to drink to be involved in activities or events.

NUS has done lots of work around supporting students’ unions to be responsible retailers but this is not just about selling alcohol because we’re not saying students shouldn’t drink – it’s about not drinking excessive amounts of alcohol being the only way to engage in student social life.

Not all students drink alcohol or feel comfortable with alcohol at events, so you could consider having more alcohol free events, or offer students food instead of alcohol as incentives for engaging with the union council for example. However, it is not just for the sake of students who do not drink that you should consider this, as it can be positive for all students if the pressure of drinking alcohol to be part of socialising is lessened and students are given a more diverse range of opportunities to belong to a group or activity.

“Challenge the notion that heavy alcohol consumption is the norm. LUU have produced a set of posters using frame and reframe theory. Attitudes towards alcohol are framed where the norm is to drink responsibly and also showing the positives of refraining from drinking.” – Leeds University Union

Challenge 'traditions' within sports teams that are exclusive or problematic

Where traditions in sports teams are normalised as part of team bonding it can be a challenging conversation to try and change this. However, if your teams are taking part in sexist or homophobic behaviours which are based on degrading women students or insulting other members then they are probably breaching the policies of the students’ unions and or the sports/athletic union while receiving funding from those sources.

If you become aware of sexist or homophobic traditions your first move should be to speak to the team captain and establish a dialogue with

them to understand what the situation is. It can be useful to talk about the impact on potential and existing team members of such behaviours as well as the wider student body. For example, a homophobic team culture can prevent LGBT+ students from getting involved in the team and may result in the team losing out on a star player because the traditions that are performed to create belonging actually serve to be exclusionary.

If you draft up some guidelines about expected behaviours from teams, you can consult with the team leaders about them and require leaders to attend a session explaining the new guidelines that have been developed in conjunction with them. An alternative that some Unions are trialling is working with clubs and societies to write their own guidelines so they feel ownership and responsibility over how they behave and can review their own traditions and implement changes to practices that are exclusionary. If you are promoting the sports teams during their recruitment phases you can work with the team to promote that they are inclusive for all members and that they reject discriminatory behaviours in the team.

“We worked hard on developing a good relationship with our Athletics Union (AU) president and AU Executive who fed into all of the plans we created and implemented. They ensured that we took the right approach with the teams and didn’t use alienating or divisive language. Through doing this we have been able to have a presence in their sports nights and also have them really visual on the campaign and activity to the student body. We were also able to work with them and the institution to put a joint night on named ‘Tackling homophobia and sexism in Rugby’ which was led by members of the AU Executive and the rugby club itself. The event saw a fully sold out room and an engaged audience ready for change.” – London School of Economics Students’ Union