

Key Theme Report

Empowering Communities of Students

Policy Development Convention, 5-6 December 2013

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Rationale and Context

Rationale

Where power is concentrated in students' unions and universities has an impact on everything we do. Are students' unions service providing organisations or empowering organisations? Are we in the business of creating change or ensuring satisfaction? How are students' unions supported by NUS UK and what are the theories and approaches we utilise to form the basis of our work?

Our goal is to enable students' unions to re-think how they are structured, to re-think where power lies and shift the balance towards communities of students which are able to carry out change in their own interest empowered by unions.

Context

This year, the Vice-President Union Development's remit covers numerous areas. In terms of project work, the Vice-President is responsible for work around:

- Activism and Organising;
- Activities;
- Affiliation;
- BUCS relationship;
- Democracy;
- Clubs and Societies;
- Union Development;
- Volunteering;
- RAG and NASFA;
- Student Media;
- Officer Development Programme (summer training);

Further, the Vice-President is also variously a member or chair of the following boards:

- NUS Services (Chair of the Board);
- NUS Charitable Services (Chair of the Board)
- NUS UK Trustee Board (Member of the Board);

Therefore, as a result of the breadth and depth of the remit, the strategic theme 'empowering student communities' was identified as a way to stitch all of these various policy portfolios and create a single over-arching theme for policy creation that would have an impact on the portfolios.

Looking at how students form communities in the sports remit and the fundraising remit whilst thinking about democracy in students' unions is something that we are determined to give more time to throughout this process.

Firstly, we must re-define the term 'community' to be about more than community volunteering, which it was first confused with.

In its simplest sense, communities of students are just that communities, wherever they exist, of students. Just to paint a picture, we've listed some:

- Clubs or societies;
- Course groups, schools and faculties;
- JCRs, halls of residence or private rented accommodation tenants;
- Freshers' or the university itself;
- Campuses;
- Students who identify as being LGBT, disabled, women and black;
- Students of different nationality;
- Students of different ages (as opposed to mature and non-mature)

Moving from Individuals to Communities

Over the past three years, much of the policy work the Vice-President has delivered has focussed on looking at how the individual behaves and interacts with the world around them, the purpose of this policy is to shift that focus from an individual to groups and communities of students.

Research

Communities

Firstly, we need to explore how we define communities as there are varying different models. Often, as previous research into participation carried out by NUS shows, there are multiple barriers which stop students joining certain groups. Therefore, we began to look at some of the literature around community.

Contemporary debates around communities are often rooted in discussion about online communities and communities of people who meet in 'the real world'. Initially, we explored work by Durkheim looking at organic and mechanical solidarity which we took to zone conference.

Our aim was to create a model which took the classical and contemporary debates around community and turn it into a grid upon which we could map different kinds of community – something that captured all different kinds of community and act as a steer for when we needed to discuss how we could empower different groups. As a result of the feedback from zone conference, the amended titles were:

- Conceptual: communities that exist as a concept
- Concrete: communities that exist in a specific time and a specific place
- Shared values: communities form based around shared values, experience and identity
- Shared interests: communities form based around shared interests and activities

These axes were then put upon a grid and each quadrant was named, listing types of community within each.

The four different kinds of community we identified were:

- Administrative communities
- Communities of identity
- Communities of location
- Communities of interest

Typology

| Administrative | Identity |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| The university | LGBT |
| The faculty | Black |
| The union | Women |
| The student movement | Disabled |
| Placement students | Faith |
| City campuses | International |
| | Asylum seekers |
| | |
| <i>External Example</i> | <i>External Example</i> |
| The National Trust | Former soldiers |

| Location | Interest |
|-------------------------|-------------------------|
| Halls of residence | Clubs |
| JCRs | Societies |
| Fresher's | Volunteering groups |
| Graduation | Council |
| Private rented | General meetings |
| Rural campuses | Courses |
| | Modules |
| | |
| <i>External Example</i> | <i>External Example</i> |
| Glastonbury | Mum's Zumba Class |

The framework for mapping communities is inserted at appendix one.

Moving from Service Provision to Empowerment

An initial look at literature around empowerment is in keeping with NUS' work around community organising. Initially, the 'I am the Change' project looked at how to empower individuals, now the project has developed and seeks to empower communities already in existence, hence the titular change to 'we are the change'.

However, when you look at the framework for communities you quickly realise that power is concentrated in administrative and location based communities, which is not where students tend to organise in communities. Democratic decision making structures are based almost always around the administrative and location based communities rather than the interest and identity groups. A question for the zone committee should be – should your democratic decision making structures (which allocate power) be centred around where students naturally organise or should students be forced to participate in structures where power is vested? These questions all relate to empowerment.

From a different sector, Lord and Hutchinson (1993) writing in the Canadian Journal of Community Mental Health identify a series of principles which underpin their research and approach to empowerment.

These principles, whilst specific to a health care community, can be translated across to our work.

Empowerment Principles for Community Practice

1. In order to understand empowerment, citizens who are devalued must be seen as oppressed and marginalized by society, not simply as clients to be served. Sources of oppression range from poverty and abuse to social isolation and lack of access to valued resources.
2. Service systems must give up their control over people who are currently devalued. This means eliminating the power relationships which exist between professionals and citizens by ensuring collaboration and by supporting consumer controlled initiatives.
3. For a power transfer to occur, citizens must be the ones to identify the problems and solutions to personal and community issues and must have direct access to funding that normally only goes to service agencies.
4. While power cannot be given to people by professionals, concerned professionals can work to eliminate the systematic barriers that have been created which oppress, control, and disempower vulnerable citizens.
5. Listening to the concerns, stories, feelings, experiences, and hopes of people who feel powerless is the basis for broadening people's awareness of their oppression. The language of professionalism, which encourages dependency and control, needs to be replaced by dialogue, which supports mutuality and reciprocity.
6. Build upon the strengths and capacities of citizens and avoid a focus on deficits. This is critical for building self-esteem, which is both an outcome and part of the empowerment process.
7. Participation in community life at three levels is critical for the empowerment of individuals:
 - a. working on issues which affect their own lives;
 - b. connecting with others who have had similar experiences;
 - c. and being involved in a range of community groups and activities.
8. Encourage and support citizens to make ongoing contributions to their communities through access to valued social roles such as employee, volunteer, mentor, advocate, or friend
9. Citizens who are consumers of services should have control over the resources and

personal supports they need to live with dignity.

10. It is possible to learn important strategies about prevention from studying the process of empowerment; for example, as people become more empowered, they rely less on formal service systems and more on informal support networks. These learnings can be used as important principles for proactively empowering potentially vulnerable individuals and groups.

Activating Existing Networks

Perhaps, by shifting our democratic focus and ultimately where power lies to communities of interest and identity from administrative communities and location based communities we could begin to activate existing networks. In education, much debate is centred on how professional practice moves beyond continued professional development and into a more empowering mode of staff development, which is built on a model which shifts focus as we are describing.

Michael Fullan (1991) argues that CPD promised so much but delivered very little for teachers. At the heart of the debate is a difference in approach from human capital to social capital which is derived from a study of competitiveness between Japanese and American countries.

The study published in 1995 entitled the Knowledge Creating Company found,

"many Western companies had invested in 'brainpower' and 'intellectual capital' without releasing the power of the knowledge held by individuals into the company as a whole. Nonaka argues that throughout any organisation individuals hold a wide range of 'tacit' knowledge which needs to be developed into 'explicit' knowledge which can be fed into the whole organisation and used as the springboard for effective change and development"

IRIS Connect (2012) Going Beyond CPD to Develop Outstanding Teaching and Learning.

Here, a human capital approach would look at an individual's performance and say that it was entirely based on their own knowledge and skills whereas a social capital approach looks at where someone gets their knowledge and their networks from, saying that we should focus on helping create networks and communities of practice rather than focussing all our attention on helping individuals get better.

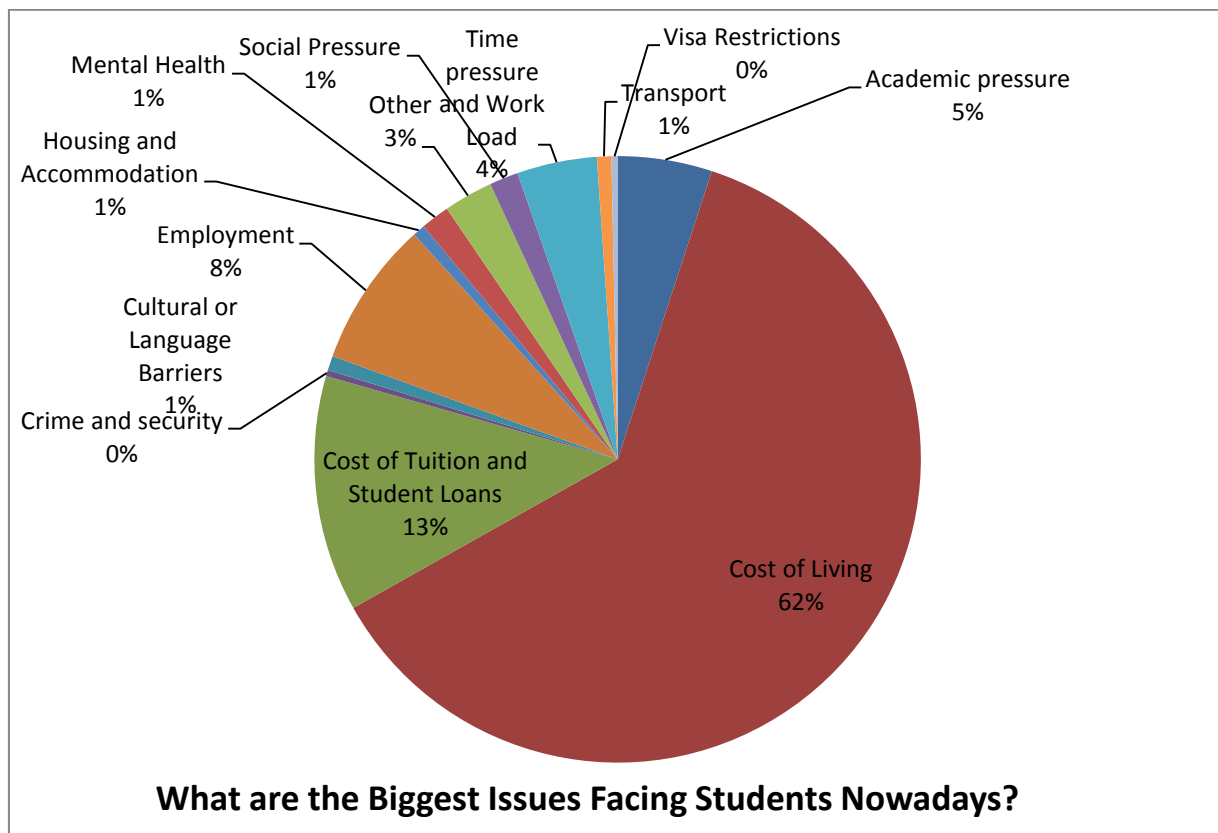
In applying this approach to our work, we should prioritise support, funding to helping communities form. Prioritising the creation of networks and communities as a first-step to empowering them should be a main focus of the zone. Similarly, by shifting democratic emphasis to communities that exist already and to empower those, we would be placing emphasis on a social capital approach – that networks of students working together will arrive at better conclusions than individual students acting alone.

What are the biggest Issues Facing Students?

NUS polled students asking what they felt the biggest issues they faced nowadays were in order to ascertain where students might focus efforts in campaigning.

In order of importance, the three biggest issues facing students were:

- Cost of living (62%)
- Cost of Tuition Fees and Student Loans (13%)
- Employment (8%)



When we looked at other polling this was consistent as students report the biggest for the future is employment.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Points for Policy Development

The zone is invited to discuss the following recommendations, challenges and areas for national conference.

1. Unions should seek to be the home of many different communities of students.
2. Students' unions should shift democratic emphasis to existing communities of students with a view to moving the centre of power to communities of identity and interest.
3. By moving democratic structures and power, students' unions should re-assess whether they are using the full powers of the Education Act 1994 to achieve their aims.
4. NUS should research new models of democracy which radically change how our organisations operate in order to empower communities of students around identity and interest. Full-time, one year sabbatical officers (as one example) may be a thing of the past.
5. The model of governance in FE should be re-visited and a new approach sought. Where resources are low, focus needs to be tighter and existing models of governance and democracy don't work.
6. There is no one structure or mechanism for achieving democratic governance.
7. As part of the conversation about shifting emphasis on democracy and power, specific reference should be made to various groups which are currently underrepresented. This list should include and not be limited to:
 - a. Women
 - b. Black students
 - c. Disabled students
 - d. Working class students
8. Opportunities to include local communities in decision making processes should be explored. Where universities and colleges are at the heart of a community, the community should be at the heart of the institution.

Appendix One

A New Framework for Mapping Communities of Students

*Communities form based
around shared interests
and activities*

Shared
Interests

Membership of this community is
time-bound. Communities are
enduring, cohesive and small.

Membership of this community is
time-bound. Communities are
large and amorphous.

Communities
of Interest

Administrative
Communities

Concrete

Conceptual

*Communities exist in
a specific place at a
specific time*

Communities
of Location

Communities
of Identity

*Communities exist as
a concept*

Membership of this community is
time-bound. Communities are
transitory, variable in size and
amorphous.

Membership of this community is
based on your identity and
changes if your identity changes.
Communities are enduring,
cohesive and small.

Shared
Values

*Communities form based
around shared values,
experiences and identity*

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