



national union of students



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STEPS TO ENGAGEMENT

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Student Engagement

NUS has a vision for all students' unions to have the resources, the capacity, the support and the understanding to be able to engage their entire membership in all appropriate activities to enrich their college experience.

The diversity of our movement ensures that there are countless ways in which students could become further engaged by their students' union throughout their educational journeys. Whether this is through becoming involved in democratic student representation, feeding back their views to inform college improvement; supporting a campaign to positively change students' experiences; attending a students' union event; or, by being a member of a club or society, students should not just feel able to engage but they should be encouraged and supported to do so.

Students' unions have a responsibility to initiate this engagement, to break down the barriers to it, to nurture and develop it, and furthermore to celebrate it. By achieving exceptional engagement, students' unions have the opportunity to cultivate new relationships, foster a more inclusive culture, extend the reach of our movement and enrich the lives of those they engage.

Steps to Engagement accompanies the online engagement hub that has been developed to help students' unions improve their current student engagement activities and to deepen these activities by developing a better understanding not just of the needs of the students they represent, but of the sheer diversity of their membership.

Students become engaged to make new friendship networks, to have fun and to help people by improving experiences and making positive changes to their college. But there are still those students who aren't being engaged and so we need to do more to break down the barriers that hamper this engagement.

We want students' unions to use this toolkit to better understand their members, to evaluate how they engage their members, and build on this to design new, innovative, relevant and creative methods that help to make their members' experiences more enriching, ultimately making their time at college more rewarding.

To access the online Steps to Engagement hub visit:
www.nusconnect.org.uk/stepstoengagement

w. www.nus.org.uk

t. 0845 5210 262

London WC1X 8QB

275 Grays Inn Road

Macadam House

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1 Foundations for Engagement

Student leaders have little engagement with the wider student body and tend to focus engagement only on people they know.

Campaigns and activities do not reflect members' interests, have minimal membership involvement, and student leaders may not understand who their membership is or what their needs might be.

There is minimal interaction with students in feedback and consultation activities, resulting in poor student involvement. Officers fail to participate fully in college meetings as they have no feedback to offer. There is a lack of communication with class reps and this further reduces potential engagement with the wider student body. Students themselves find it difficult to engage with the union because they don't really understand its purpose or who the officers are.

2 Emerging Engagement

Engagement is best described as 'inconsistent'.

Student leaders do make an effort to talk and to listen to their membership, but the focus may be on the same group of students each time, potentially those from the same courses or with similar interests. This may be because officers lack an understanding of the circumstances of the broader student population. The students' union is involved in collecting information from students about their needs and interests but this may be limited to talking to class reps from a number of classes within the same department.

A few students want to put forward suggestions for activity but are unsure how to do this – and when they have – they don't know what the result has been. There is a desire to campaign on student issues but these activities may be ineffective or irrelevant due to a lack of evidence on student issues.

3 Established Engagement

Students' unions make a consistent effort to engage with their membership through different mechanisms such as taking time to talk and to listen to students at break/lunch times, and setting up suggestion boxes.

The feedback that they collect is discussed by officers and used to develop campaign activities where appropriate. These campaigns begin to have a positive impact. This activity is reported back through posters around college and on the union Facebook page while relationships with certain staff members are improved.

While this increased engagement is positive, the narrow audience involved does not reflect membership diversity. Class reps do help to generate ideas from a more diverse range of students but not consistently. There are a number of clubs and societies for people who have similar social, political or sporting interests. The union is well known to a number of students from a variety of courses who feel confident in putting forward suggestions – however these students tend to be in college frequently and therefore more familiar with the union.

4 Advanced Engagement

Students' unions implement many mechanisms to understand the needs and interests of a wide group of students.

Communication between the union, class reps and other student groups is used to gather qualitative information on student's needs and interests. Further information is generated through focus groups and by analysing data from college and government surveys.

This information is used to inform the work of the union, whether that is organising activities, or developing campaigns to improve experiences of specific groups of students. The union is involved in national campaigns and has the confidence and expertise to lobby MPs.

Communication between students, the union and relevant college staff is facilitated in part by class reps who act as a conduit for ideas, as well as by union officers who see the benefit of maintaining strong relationships with staff. Many class reps have been elected – including a number of evening courses.

A deeper understanding of the membership enables the union itself to set up committees, clubs and societies for students who define themselves in certain ways or have particular social, political and sporting interests. However the continuity of union activity, from one year to the next, remains under threat, undermining the long-term success of membership engagement mechanisms.

5 Exceptional Engagement

The students' union has a successful and ever-evolving engagement plan, the result of which is a heightened understanding of their membership's needs and interests.

Positive changes to the student experience are attributed to the union, and the college recognises and celebrates the union's achievements and impact.

By using consultation mechanisms such as college and government surveys, and focus groups, as well as drop-in sessions led by a diverse range of student officers and class reps, it has become possible for the union to map their membership and generate activity based on the findings of their research. As a result of this, campaigns and activities have been established to tackle a genuinely representative range of student issues. Support for campaigns and activities is always consistent due to the number and diversity of engagement mechanisms the union utilises.

The union implements a full range of face-to-face and virtual engagement mechanisms. These range from a strong online presence, to drop-in sessions, to taking time to meet with students outside of regular college hours, as well as arranging to meet apprentices. All of these activities are supported by a successful class rep system. These mechanisms have allowed the union to enrich the lives of their membership both individually and collectively recognising when to support students directly, and when to signpost them elsewhere.

