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Why have national organisations?

Author: Matt Hyde

Chief Executive, NUS

In this article Matt Hyde, Chief Executive of NUS, builds on some of the thinking from his recent articles in Agenda and suggests that in spite of the increased diversification of students' unions we need collective endeavour now more than ever.

At the end of my last Agenda article, I promised I'd say more about the future of course representation in this article. That was a bit of lie. I will write about that in a future Agenda as I can't remember a time when the importance of the student voice was so high on the agenda of the Government and sector agencies. But as I was on a panel at NUS Services' In Session event in late January talking about 'Collectivism in the 21st Century', and as we also had a seminar on Collaborations in February, I thought I'd write about collectivism and the role of national organisations because that seems more pertinent.

You will probably be aware that conversations are taking place between officers and staff about the future of the student movement. This essentially involves an assessment of the likely future landscape for the student movement, then having identified the future needs of students and students' unions we will be rethinking how these needs can be better served from a national perspective in the future. To do that it's worth thinking through why organisations would undertake activity nationally and collectively rather than individually.

Jim Dickinson and I came up with the following model of why organisations might work together collectively or through national organisations. I have added some initial thoughts (in bold) about how these concepts could be developed in the future.

> " Are there economic advantages to be gained through shared back office functions either at a local level or by delivering national provision of central services such as IT or finance."

Role One: Facilitating Networking and Sharing Practice

At its most basic level there is a role for a central or national body to assist its users or members to network, share best practice, discuss and deliberate. In our context this could be officer to officer, staff to staff or officer and staff to officer and staff. Whilst social networking tools make this easier these days there is still a role for someone centrally to initiate and facilitate networking and the sharing of ideas as well as to stimulate conversation and debate (not shut it down). Often there are advantages in this being face to face (through conferences, seminars or specialist groups). And where this is done effectively a community emerges and officers and staff can become better at what they do – not simply avoiding reinventing the wheel but also potentially innovating by bringing together different perspectives and diverse thinking, catalysing new activity.

Moving Forward: We want our new extranet to give new opportunities for staff and officers to upload materials, share best practice and discuss key issues affecting students and students' unions. Can we create more spaces in the future to empower students' union officers and staff to work together, think creatively, generate new ideas and stimulate exciting policy changes, as well as reinvigorating the student movement community.

Role Two: Insourcing

There will be times when a member in need could be supported by another member and that often needs to be centrally brokered. There are good examples of where this has happened successfully in the student movement – the staff member who goes on secondment to another union or the senior manager that undertakes another senior managers' appraisal supporting their officer team.

Moving Forward: I can't help but think that insourcing from within the student movement could become a more common solution in the future – for both personal development for the secondee and providing much needed expertise and support for the seconder. Do we need a structured solution to what is currently ad hoc provision? National coordination could ensure there is a list of all staff in students' unions, where expertise is documented and shared so that mentoring can take place or potential secondments and the sharing of talent can be enacted. In addition, is there a national role for brokering new collaborative ventures between students' unions to share costs, drive income or improve service delivery to students?

Role Three: Pooling Resources for Specific Expertise or Economic Advantage

This role is probably the most tangible in terms of user or member benefit. A classic example might be where national research or policy development is needed and by individually chucking some money in to the pot one can afford to do this rather than pay for it individually 600 times. Another example might be pooling resources for legal advice – take for example the QC's opinion on the separateness of students' unions which saved several students' unions from being taken over by the universities or the thousands of pounds saved through the PPL opt-in group at NUSSL. Then, of course, the most tangible form of economic advantage is the purchasing consortium – where millions of pounds are saved by buying collectively rather than in isolation.

Moving Forward: Have we exploited this sufficiently and could we look at extending collective purchasing in new areas such as student activities or membership services? On the expenditure side, are there economic advantages to be gained through shared back office functions either at a local level or by delivering national provision of central services such as IT or finance?

Role Four: Referral or Access to External Expertise

There will then be times when the advice, support, service or activity is not able to sourced from within the student movement, or from the national organisations, but where the national body is well placed to signpost expertise or to provide access to external expertise or organisations – sometimes at a preferential rate (examples here might include the NCVO deal brokered by NUS or the ACEVO offer brokered by AMSU).

Moving Forward: An approved list of consultants could be produced (who have been robustly assessed) with negotiated reductions in fees on the areas of training, development, interim

management or recruitment with a range of providers able to deliver at many levels and types of students' unions.

Role Five: The Standard Bearer

Lastly organisations might ensure that a national body could be the upholder and raiser of standards. For some sectors that might mean establishing a regulator and/ or intervening where standards fall below a certain level (as happens in the Arts Council). SUEI is a really good example of where the student movement has come together to endorse a quality mark for students' unions which includes internal as well as external consultants and assessors.

Moving Forward: Do we need a more proactive approach to support those unions who are about to collapse? We have seen 15 unions in the last two years lose their commercial services and an increasing number who are about to collapse through a break down

in relationship with their parent/ partner institution and/ or through an unsustainable funding model. Over the last year, NUS has received at least one call per month from unions who are in this situation. Should we be establishing a crisis unit as other sectors have done which looks to support those unions in most need – with a range of solutions from secondments and insourcing to outsourcing and interim arrangements. The key here is ensuring buy-in from students' union officers and staff to any solution.

Jim and I would be interested to receive feedback on this model of national working. Is there anything we have got wrong or have missed out? Let us know at matt.hyde@nus.org.uk or jim@nus.org.uk

> " We are as strong as our weakest member and if 'weak' students' unions start to collapse this will be the thin end of the wedge. "

If we look across the roles identified above, a number of things become clear. Firstly, that not everyone in the student movement is getting consistent access to the functions identified in a coherent way. Secondly, that if we were to "start again" in trying to devise structures or organisations to deliver the above things, we probably wouldn't start from where we are now. And thirdly, that getting all of the functions above right needs ongoing commitment and involvement from students' union officers and staff- it requires committed members rather than just passive customers of services.

The increasing diversification of the further and higher education sector, and resulting diversification of students' unions, comes with increased challenges as a one-size-fit-all approach from a national perspective is rarely if ever appropriate. We have not only seen the emergence of mission groups, but a diversification within those mission groups. We've also seen a blurring between FE and HE and an increasingly diverse student body with distinctions between full and part-time student and modes of study muddied.

The diversification of the student movement, largely a result of the marketisation of higher education, will lead many to conclude that now is the time for unions to go their own way and act in isolation. But I think this would be a tragic mistake. I still believe the old cliché that we are as strong as our weakest member and if 'weak' students' unions start to collapse this will be the thin end of the wedge. Registrars will start talking about how their lives have improved since the demise of their students' union and the very values we hold dear will start to be challenged – our student-led nature, our ability to respond to students needs, our ability to independently represent the student voice. But for us to resist this challenge we need to think more creatively about how we reinvent some of the assumptions above – especially as we contemplate the future of the student movement.

Collaborations- the project

Author: Ian King
Chief Executive, NUS Services Limited

Much has been written and said about the collaborations project and as this starts to gather momentum going into 2009 Ina King here offers some thoughts and reflections on the general area of colla- borations and the particular aspect of the project which the student movement has set itself to look at.

From a personal point of view, people will know I have been banging a drum about this for a few years, trying to reflect the dislocation and disconnection within the national organisations and the duplication and enhanced costs, not to mention the lack of clarity and the mutual distrust which was prevalent until quite recently.

In essence, that was on a fairly operational agenda, based upon who does what and for how much money and can this be done differently, cheaper, in the interests of our shareholders/members (a base we share).

Moving ahead to 2008/09 we will enter a much different arena where we are critically looking at radical alterations in student lifestyle, the way students' unions do their business and an NUS on the cusp of a significant governance change to completely remodel and re-brand itself to be fit for purpose for the 21st century.

The frustrating aspect I suspect for people involved in the discussions is that we are trying to avoid jumping directly to a discussion on structures. It is commonly agreed that when NUS Services and NSSO Ltd merged in 1989, having agreed the principles very early in the process, we were thereafter bogged down in process. This time there is a determination to avoid that so the project is split into chunks:-

1. What is the project and what does it mean?

2. What will the landscape look like in the period ahead?

3. As a consequence of the above, what does the national organisation(s) need to provide for its shareholders /members going forward?

An apparently straightforward agenda until you start to discuss some of the more in depth topics. There is a clarity of purpose that there is no argument about the fact there should be singular back office hub somewhere in the UK to undertake the

> " We are trying to avoid jumping directly to a discussion on structures."

series of operational services. Increasingly, as we speak, effective collaboration is occurring between NUS and NUS Services in these very areas – IT, website, some elements of finance, marketing and communications, collecting NUS affiliation fees, Central Billing and many more to come. Equally, there is an ongoing debate about what precise role should AMSU or student staff organisations maintain going forward ranging from issues of location to vision and purpose. Last but not least there is uncertainty about what precisely the

landscape will look like in, say, 2014. Hopefully, the NUS governance discussions will help to clarify that position but not necessarily entirely and it is a difficult landscape in the current context of a real push of public expenditure allied to the pending discussion in 2009/10 (post the next general election) on raising, or not, the cap.

At the time of writing, to what extent is the education system recession proof. We know further education is probably not due to the socio economic circumstances of most students. How recession proof is higher education, may be yes, may be no, in terms of parents being made unemployed or having restricted means and/or the drying up of student casual employment which may be an issue going forward bearing in mind the forthcoming compulsory badging of bar staff.

As a consequence, we would hope that post Easter 2009 with clarity on NUS governance and the beginnings of clarity on the requirements of students' unions and students going forward from their national organisations we can start to plot what the national support services need to be and by whom and how those are going to be best delivered. This obviously creates uncertainty but also creates enormous opportunity for change and doing things differently. In the case of NUS Services we are already seeing our membership decline in real terms as students' unions cease trading. Will we have a smaller, much better defined membership, what level of trading will those members be undertaking and how long can we sustain the cutting edge in national purchasing arrangements when our suppliers are losing margin on an ever increasing basis and the changing situations as many of our suppliers are consolidating their positions and terminating their trade or undertaking global merger. It is interesting to note that in other areas of the public and

private sector these types of discussion have taken place on a number of occasions.

Recently we have seen the cancer charities come together and the old age charities come together and their rationale was that they had a common

> " In the case of NUS Services we are already seeing our membership decline in real terms as students' unions cease trading."

goal and should not be completing against each other and that by joining together they could provide a better experience.

It is timely to think of our common connection, the students' unions and their individual students. We owe it to them to marshal and use our resources to best effect and try to predict an exciting future with our national organisations primed and strategically defined to deliver the best support service we can in the period ahead.

What is the future of working in Students' Unions?

Author: Duncan Mann
former AMSU Director

The future of students' unions as workplaces is complex and will be affected by many changes, both external and internal. Here Duncan Mann lays out four key questions that he believes will define the future of working in students' unions and in turn define the work that AMSU needs to undertake to meet future needs.

AMSU's work in supporting the management of students' unions involves us working with permanent staff at all levels of our member unions. Our member unions employ around 5000 permanent staff in a diverse range of roles and as we plan for our future, we inevitably have to think about what your futures hold. Whether you are a staff member who sees your current role as the only one you are ever likely to hold in a students' union, or you intend to stay in students' unions for the rest of your career, we need to understand those drivers that will affect your work and your career choices.

What do students' unions exist to do?

Obviously, this is a huge question, but it will impact on you whenever it is asked

> "A sudden burst of new representation related roles have been created throughout the country."

by your trustees, your members, government and of course your funders (especially the educational institutions most of our resource is provided by). Ultimately, the way these key groups view the role of students' unions will define what students' unions do, and what they employ staff to do.

It is the shifting answers to this question that have driven many of the biggest changes in students' union employment over the past few decades. Although the answers vary, when a common response begins to emerge jobs start to change. Recently, with a number of unions deciding that representation is the key to what students'

unions do, a sudden burst of new representation related roles have been created throughout the country. On the other hand, asking this question has at various times led to students' unions declining to run student volunteering, sports clubs and bars & catering activities. In the early 1990s, when this question reach the heart of government we came close to seeing students' unions closed down nationwide.

Now, with the growing focus academic institutions are putting on the student experience, driven in no small part by the student movement, they too are asking this question more and more. One of the biggest challenges that students' unions will need to overcome is the fact that virtually every service/activity that they provide is in some other institution provided in some way by the institution itself or not offered at all. Although there are clear benefits that come from students' unions running these services, the case is not universally accepted, and any union could face a change in university attitude that fundamentally affects the work of their staff.

To what extent will SUs integrate with the wider third sector?

As the Charities Act comes fully into force for students' unions over the next couple of years there are likely to be changes to how we view our organisations, what working practices we put into place, and of course who applies for jobs in our sector. We have, for several years, seen staff crossing-over between students' unions and the wider third sector (as we have with wider commercial sectors). However, there have always been barriers based in the lack of shared language and practice for people trying to move both ways. Despite many of the skills being shared, it is not always easy to communicate how well students' union experience can prepare people for charity roles, nor for students' unions to recognise what people from the wider charity sector can bring to our often very specialized roles. However, this will

" Full integration with the third sector would bring significant changes for staff in students' unions in many ways. "

certainly begin to change, the only question is how widely this will affect students' unions.

Full integration with the third sector would bring significant changes for staff in students' unions in many ways. Already, some students' unions are applying working practices from charities. We have seen increasing numbers of students' unions achieving the Investing in Volunteers standard, many adopting

trustee board structures with their roots in charity governance and some already registering as charities. The future may well bring more dramatic changes. We may not be far from a situation where students' unions are totally immersed in a world of compacts and contracts, where everything is about stakeholder value and where short-term project funding leads to limited-term job contracts.

Further integration into the third sector will also have a massive impact on career paths. If students' unions become fully recognised as part of local charitable activity, we will see less isolation of the sector. Currently about two-thirds of SU management appointments come from within the SU sector. This would be likely to become lower, but also, we might see a growing tendency for people returning to students' unions after a period in other charities, especially those who have worked with us as sabbaticals, in their first

full-time jobs or indeed as student staff. We may even reach the stage where the whole idea of drawing this distinction between students' unions and wider third sector is alien to people.

How will our future members expect us to behave?

It is the nature of students' union's working practices that they are responsive to their members' expectations, and despite growing numbers of mature students we continue to work in a predominantly youth-focussed sector. This keeps us responding to the latest trends in customer/member expectations, often ahead of the trends reaching the mainstream. In the modern world, people engage with organisations on their own terms or not at all, so for students' unions to succeed we must plan our work around our members' expectations.

So what is the future for the kind of customer service we provide to our members? Clearly technology is defining much of the expectation level at the moment. For many of us now working in the student movement, the internet is still something that came along and changed how we do certain things. For many new students it is simply how things have always been done. But the impact of the internet goes well beyond methodology for service delivery or sales – it has had a profound effect on people's attitudes to choice. Through the internet, people have become used to getting what they want, when they want, how they want. Large organisations are exploiting this opportunity to leave smaller operations behind. It is now possible to get products, information and even immediate human customer service responses 24 hours a day.

Social networking is also impacting on student expectations. The fluidity and immediacy of belonging to social and interest groups that online resources provide sets a standard for our services

to meet. Allowing the creation of groups of common interest has been at the core of what students' unions do almost as long as students' unions have existed (in many cases it was these groups that came together to create the students' union!). We provide spaces for social interaction in our commercial outlets, societies to allow people to identify others they may have affinity with, and encourage the embracing of new experiences. However, students will now arrive in further and higher education with an expectation that contacting likeminded individuals is easy, unbureaucratic and free from barriers.

" Social networking is also impacting on student expectations "

Examples like this highlight the need for us to review what we offer and how we offer it. And, inevitably, this may well affect people working in students' unions. Providing the accessibility our members may expect of us could lead to a redefinition of how, where and when we deliver services, and in turn how, where and when students' union staff work.

How far will trends of change in working practice go?

Many students' unions pride themselves on being good employers, and to maintain that position they will need to keep up with other organisations. Over the last decade employers across all sectors have worked hard to meet the needs and desires of their staff and the

new legislative conditions they work under. Employees now have more choice in how they work than ever before and in many sectors flexible working is becoming standard rather than exceptional. However, it remains to be seen whether this is the start of a long-term change, or a blip brought about by a strong economy where employers compete for the best employees. Whichever way, changes in practice elsewhere will filter into students' unions. We sit at on the join between public, private and third sectors and whatever approaches they adopt affect the expectations of students' union staff.

Other changes are likely to affect our ability to recruit and retain the best people as well. One area that may see a significant shift in the next few years is attitudes to commuting. The importance of work-life balance, and the gradually growing costs of transportation along with increasing attention on the environmental effects of travel may reach a critical point in the next few years. Some anticipate a fundamental shift away from commuting, with the expectation that employment will become more localised with more people living and working within the same locality. If this were to come and be combined with a reduced willingness to relocate that may come from an economic downturn, students' unions may find that they need to look closer to home for their future staff.

As with all of these questions, students' unions must keep abreast of the changing situation if we are to be employers of choice for the staff we want to keep and to recruit in the future. Having the right staff, and having them properly supported is key to the success of individual students' unions and the movement as a whole. What is certain in the future is that we will not get this right unless attention is paid to this area of our work, and we will not get it right unless we work together to achieve it.

Laughter is the best medicine

Author: Marsha Herman-Betzen
Executive Director, Association of
College Unions International

In our regular column from AMSU's US Cousin, here Marsha reflects on the power of laughter at work .

One of the best ways for me to unwind is to watch a movie at home by myself. For two splendid hours, I can become fixated in a story other than mine. And if I can watch a movie that can make me laugh or cry, better yet both, I have achieved the winning combination for my ultimate diversion.

I recently watched "The Bucket List," starring Jack Nicholson and Morgan Freeman, two of my favorite actors. It is the story of two terminally ill men who head off on a road trip with a wish list of to-do's before they die. While some items on their list are wild and crazy, like jumping out of an airplane, many of the items are unbelievably basic, like "laughing until I cry."

There is nothing better than to experience a prolonged belly laugh that makes your gut ache and the tears flow. Almost as fun is watching a friend or colleague get so tickled that they completely lose it. I have always been lucky to work in environments where there was a lot of laughter. Several of my ACUI Central Office colleagues have uncontrollable, infectious laughs that give way to huge eye-wiping tears within seconds. Even if you don't know what they are laughing at, watching them cackle is fantastically contagious.

I can't imagine the work day if I could not use humor as a stress-reliever. And while unthinkingly I can espouse the benefits of laughing, much has been written to corroborate what I know to be true. There are immeasurable therapeutic benefits from laughing both from a physiological as well as psychological perspective.

As many of you begin your new academic year surrounded by depleted resources, rising prices, longer days, and reduced personal renewal time, make sure you lead by modeling a workplace environment that is fun. I think some people perceive those who cut up as being less productive. However, I believe the opposite to be true. A work environment filled with humor increases productivity.

> " Therein lay two of the biggest fallacies of a fun work environment: humor and laughter at work do not correlate to not caring or decreased productivity."

When I was at the Oklahoma State University Student Union I supervised mostly part-time student employees (information desk staff, night and weekend building managers, reservationists, and set-up crew). It was important that all union events from student meetings, to outside conferences, to banquets, to football Saturdays, to the president's and trustees' events be set and executed to perfection. It was stressful—based on the sheer number of venues, events, participants, and departments involved—to deliver on the high standards we collectively had established. And while our work was commendable on most occasions, we

were criticized by other departments who did not think we were taking our jobs seriously enough because we were irreverent jokesters.

Therein lay two of the biggest fallacies of a fun work environment: humor and laughter at work do not correlate to not caring or decreased productivity. According to clinical psychologist Steven M. Sultanoff, in his article "Taking Humor Seriously at Work," humor in the workplace is an asset that can help facilitate interpersonal communication, aid in building relationships, reduce stress, provide immeasurable perspective, and promote energy and engagement. In addition, the creativity quotient goes up exponentially.

Many years ago, Norman Cousins wrote the ground-breaking book "Anatomy of an Illness." Cousins had been diagnosed with an incurable disease and given very little time to live. When he got the death sentence he checked himself out of the hospital and into an expensive Beverly Hills, Calif., hotel where the service and the food were better and cheaper than that of the hospital. There he watched old Candid Camera television shows and Marx Brothers films.

"I made the joyous discovery that 10 minutes of genuine belly laughter had an anesthetic effect and would give me at least two hours of pain-free sleep," Cousins said. "… I was greatly elated by the discovery that there is a physiologic basis for the ancient theory that laughter is good medicine."

Cousins beat the odds by living a long life. So, if healing and regeneration can possibly be affected by attitude and laughter, can you imagine what they could do for the workplace? Think about laughter improving your ability to cope. Think about laughter reducing your anxiety. Think about taking a lunch break full of funny stories among colleagues and its therapeutic benefit when you return to the task at hand. Finally, think about being silly. Some of the best work I have ever done came while having a raucous good time.

Developing an International Strategy for Students' Unions

Author: Jo Holliday
former NUS International Student Experience Project Manager

The National Union of Students (NUS) has secured extended funding to test a model International Students Strategy for Students' Unions. The overall aim of this project is to embed the needs of international students at the heart of Students' Unions.

This project is in recognition of the growing numbers of international students studying in the UK, and the role of the Students' Union to represent their interests and provide appropriate services/activities. There are a small number of Students' Unions who have excellent levels of engagement with their international students, such as Sheffield, Warwick and Imperial College. However, many other Students' Unions could do much more to support their international students. NUS aims to support unions to meet the needs of their diverse student body – a crucial step in Students' Unions improving students' experiences in the UK.

The project is funded under the Prime Minister's Initiative for international education under the Student Experience strand which is co-ordinated by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA: see www.ukcisa.org.uk for more information). The aim of this strand is to help UK institutions to further improve services to international students so that their overall satisfaction will increase.

International student recruitment in HE has increased by nearly 40 per cent over the past ten years. At present

14 per cent of students in HE are from outside the UK. There is great work being done in UK students' unions to meet the needs of international students – union satisfaction levels among international

students are higher than 80 per cent, as evidenced in a recent survey conducted by the International Students' Barometer. But we can do better.

A dedicated NUS project group has worked with students' unions to develop a strategic framework and audit tool to inspire and guide all students' unions in HE. This is about building better unions – unions where international students feel able to shape and contribute to the democratic process and have their needs met – be this for social engagement, academic representation or welfare support.

But we want it to be more than that. NUS is committed to internationalising the student experience for all students, by increasing

the opportunities for home and international students to engage with each other.

We are now looking for a further 20 students' unions in HE to adopt this strategic framework and undertake an international audit in 2009–10, using the tools in the report available online at www.officeronline.co.uk/international/

For further information on the project please contact:
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Meet the Parents

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Unique new research reveals the ways in which Universities- and Unions- need to change to become family friendly

'Meet the Parents', is the first ever UK-wide report into the experiences of students with children in further and higher education.

Government efforts to widen participation and undertake welfare reform have led to an increase in the number of students with children. But NUS research has found that the practical measures and imaginative thinking required to respond to the needs of such students have not necessarily accompanied a rise in numbers. Student parents are trying to make the most of the opportunities available; they are an inspiring and hard-working group of learners, highly motivated by their family responsibilities and passionate about learning. Their determination to succeed is, however, constantly tested by a combination of obstructive policies, inaccessible institutional practices, and cultural assumptions about who 'students' are.

So who are student parents? Whilst research suggests that parents who study are more likely to be women, part-time and mature, it is also clear from our research that students with children are a diverse group. They can be mature or young learners; international or UK students; might access many forms of benefits and student support, or be eligible for none.

We spoke to parents completing PhDs and those beginning level one courses, those who had never been to their students' union, and those who represented other students in sabbatical roles.

But more striking than the differences are the similarities in their experiences of education. This experience is a challenging one, with limited childcare funding available, complex student support arrangements, inaccessible teaching practices, and little or no time to take part in wider student life.

The ability of parents to participate and succeed in education is central to the success of the Government's aims to end child poverty, raise employment, widen participation and increase skills.

But just last year, Government cut institutional funding for equivalent or lower qualifications (ELQs), effectively pricing many women 'returners' – those who have taken time off to raise a family – out of higher education. 2008 also saw the Department for Work and Pensions announce moves to eradicate income support, and with it lone parents' rights to access further and higher education without having to also be 'available for work'.

Despite these obstacles, the students we spoke to were determined to succeed. Being a positive role model to their children is enormously important to many of those we spoke to. These students are using their time in education to embed learning into their family life, raising their children's aspirations and expectations in the process. The prospect of debt from participation in either further or higher education, in the form of tuition fees, course and childcare costs, means that the decision to enter education is not taken lightly. As a result, student parents feel they have more to lose if they fail.

In our research- a full copy of which is available now on www.officeronline.co.uk, we drew fifteen key conclusions which we share here.

1. Nobody knows exactly how many student parents there are because institutions are not required to collect this information. This in turn makes accurate allocations of resources or budgeting impossible. Collecting data on numbers of student parents is something that academics, advisors and students themselves felt would improve the ability of institutions and funding bodies to effectively support student parents.

2. Research suggests that the majority of student parents are women, mature and studying parttime. Our research also found that the vast majority of home students do not move to attend college or university (92 per cent of UK respondents). This can affect their experience significantly, in terms of choice of course and institution, travel time and costs, and levels of participation in wider student life.

3. There was a clear trend for many student parents to be studying on vocational courses, such as social care, health or education, with 42 per cent of our respondents having to do a placement as a compulsory part of their course. These students experience particular difficulties accessing registered childcare. Placements can change from term to term and may require overnight stays, when registered care is unavailable.

4. Student parents are hard-working and passionate about education, about improving their own and their children's educational and employment prospects and financial security, and about the positive impact that being a student parent had on both their academic achievement and on their relationships with their children and family life. Three quarters (75 per cent) of survey respondents felt that being a student parent had been a positive experience for them and their family; more than a third felt that being a student parent had helped them to be a good role model to their children.
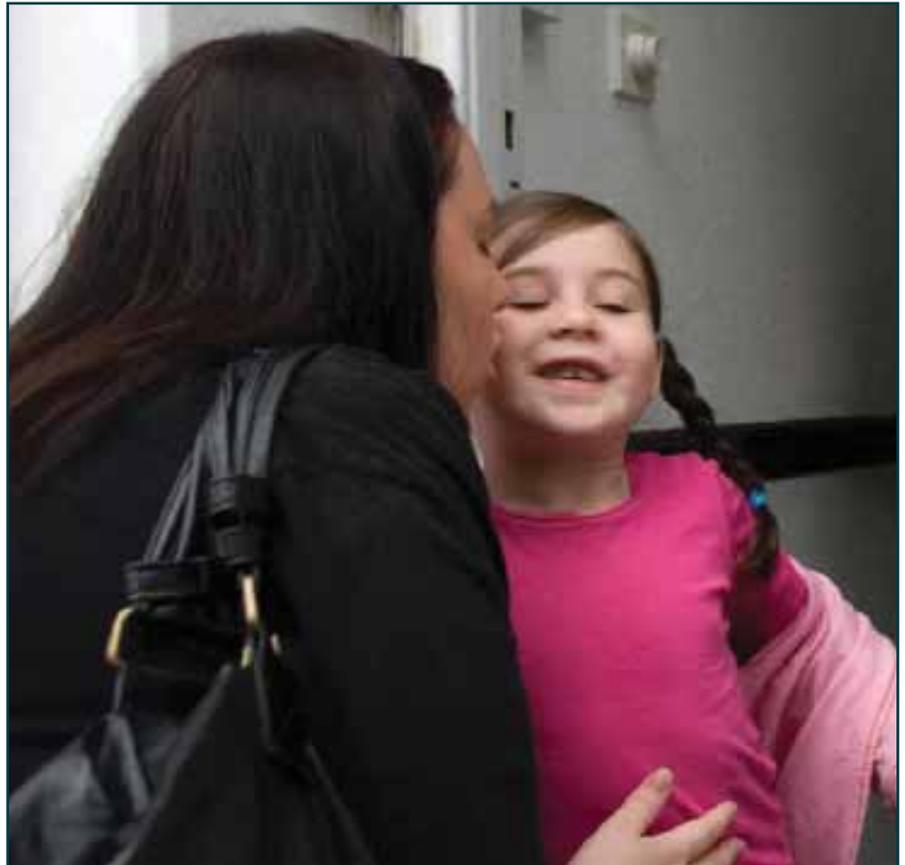
5. Student parents consistently displayed genuine enthusiasm for their courses despite numerous real and perceived barriers to their full and successful participation in learning. The majority of these issues stemmed from the mismatch between traditional course organisation, including timetabling, holidays, deadlines, placements and group work and the needs of students with children.

6. Student parents are an at-risk group in terms of student retention, with 60 per cent of survey respondents having thought about leaving their course. This figure rises to 65 per cent for lone parents. Personal ambition and creating financial security for their children are two of the main reasons that student parents remain on their course. Staff in institutions are a vital swing factor in student parents' experience, with individuals often 'at the mercy of beneficent tutors'.

7. Little time, no money for additional childcare, and parenting responsibilities make it very difficult for student parents to get involved with student life outside their course. Timings of events, costs, alcohol and a lack of 'child-friendly' activities put additional obstacles in the way of student parents' engagement in the student community. One in ten say they feel isolated as a student with children.

8. Students with children face considerable financial pressures due to a combination of insufficient childcare funding, lack of funding for associated course costs and reduced benefits. Lone parents are the 'poorest' group; they are

more likely to apply for hardship funds, take on additional debt and are less able to work because of a lack of childcare support from a partner. Student parents feel guilty that their children 'go without' as a result of this.

9. There is no clear or consistent funding entitlement for student parents in either FE or HE. Funding depends on mode of study, sector, UK country, age and marital status. This severely financially disadvantages some groups of student parents compared with others. A significant proportion – 76 per cent – of our respondents received no childcare funding at all and only 11 per cent say they receive enough funding to cover their expenses.

10. Student parents are one of the few groups of students eligible for benefits whilst studying, but the complex interaction between benefits and student support presents a number of problems.

Student parents need to be 'experts' about what they are entitled to, and agencies not communicating with each other can often lead to over and underpayments of benefits, leaving students with debts or in serious hardship. Students have to switch between benefits and student support several times a year.

11. Provision of information about childcare options and financial entitlements were found to be seriously lacking for students with children. Only 14 per cent felt that they had received sufficient information about childcare, and just 18 per cent felt they had received enough information about their financial entitlements to make an informed decision about becoming a student parent.

12. Students with children face a number of difficulties accessing childcare which is suitable for their needs. The national shortage of childcare places, high costs, a

shortfall in childcare funding of between 15 and 100 per cent for students across the board, and the flexibility required by most student parents combine to ensure that student parents are disadvantaged from the offset.

13. 79 per cent of student parents we surveyed always, frequently or sometimes used family or friends for childcare in order to attend university or college; of those more than a third (37 per cent) use it exclusively. One in five of all respondents pay for it, despite no statutory funding being available for such care.

14. Half of all students with children have been late for, or have had to miss, a class because of problems with childcare; 16 per cent have received a library fine for the same reason. Lone parents are more likely to have missed lectures due to problems with childcare or child sickness.

15. Students are not considered to be 'good customers' for childcare providers. They often need irregular hours, at awkward times and are subject to last-minute changes and late provision of timetables. Providers may also have to wait for payment from statutory funding bodies.

NUS has identified six areas where changes to policies, practices and attitudes would significantly enhance the experience of students with children in further and higher education. In the full report we have listed key recommendations under each of these areas for the consideration of Government, institutions and students' unions. It is available for download at http://www.officeronline.co.uk, and is well worth a read.

For the reasons outlined here it is crucial that student parents receive the support they need to succeed. We hope that this report will encourage efforts – by government, institutions and students' unions – to enhance the experience of students with children in further and higher education. If you need any help in using the report locally to improve the picture for student parents please do let us know.

On leadership... Urgency and Penguins

Author: Barry Dore
Change Solutions

In the first of a series of articles on leadership, Barry Dore writes about creating a sense of urgency and driving change, with a little help from penguins.

It's an over used phrase at the moment that we live in difficult and turbulent times but it's also true. Students' Unions, along with the vast majority of organisations in the private, public and third sectors, are faced with falling revenues and the real prospect of reductions in income in the future.

Surviving these challenges and emerging strong and fit for purpose requires exceptional leadership, the willingness to confront brutal facts as early as possible, to challenge the status quo and the ability to execute change.

It was Charles Darwin, no less, who wrote in the 'Origin of the Species'

'It is not the strongest of the species that will survive, nor the most intelligent, but the ones most responsive to change'

The good news is that I increasingly find leaders who are up to this challenge. I spent some time recently working with the Chief Executive and senior managers of a Students' Union exploring future scenarios of significant reductions in income levels (from trading and subvention). This Chief Executive and her team understood that they needed to act decisively now to address these possible scenarios before they became a reality.

Driving change in any organisation is a daunting challenge. Leaders have to overcome many obstacles and much opposition, above all they need to create a sense of urgency, an understanding that change is essential.

John Kotter has done some great work in this area with his books 'Leading Change' and 'A Sense of Urgency.' I also particularly like his book 'Our Iceberg is Melting' which is a compelling fable about driving change seen through the eyes of a penguin colony in Antarctica (don't groan, it works!).

> " Driving change in any organisation is a daunting challenge."

The premise of the book (easily and quickly read at only 140 pages, and that includes the pictures of cute penguins!) is that leaders of any team or organisation need to be constantly aware of the challenges their organisation faces and to plan to drive and deliver successful change to meet those challenges, and that includes overcoming those complacent and doubting, who bury their heads in the sand, those Kotter refers to as the 'No-Nos'.

In the fable one of the penguins (not a leader at the top of their organisation) notices that their iceberg is beginning to melt and then faces the challenge of convincing those at the top of the problem and then galvanising them and eventually the whole colony into action, overcoming the many barriers and obstacles to change along the way.

The book summarises the eight steps that lie at the heart of any successful change programme, big or small, as follows:

1. Reduce complacency and increase urgency. It is only when people really get the need to change, and change now, that they buy in and contribute fully.
2. Pull a team together to guide the needed change
3. Create a vision, a clear and compelling picture of the future.
4. Communicate the vision (by capturing hearts and minds, not through 144 powerpoint slides!). Build understanding and buy-in.
5. Empower others to act, removing barriers so that those who want to make the vision a reality can do so
6. Create some short term wins
7. Don't let up, be relentless until the vision is a reality
8. Make the changes stick, because tradition dies a hard death.

And yes, the penguins do succeed, they find a new home on an even nicer iceberg, and if Disney ever made it into a film there wouldn't be a dry eye in the house! They also understand that the new iceberg will not be their final home, change is constant.

I think that eight point framework for driving any change is just so powerful, and is the basis on which I see many of my clients deliver successful and sustainable change in their teams or organisations.

As a footnote, at the end of the Workshop the Chief Executive and team I mentioned above compiled their response to future scenarios, a mixture of developing alternative sources of income, driving efficiencies and challenging sacred cows, but then realised there was nothing stopping them taking most of the action now, they did not need to wait for these possible scenarios to become realities. They could drive that change and build an effective, fit for purpose organisation now, ready to face the challenges ahead. It's what great organisations do.

Barry works with organisations of all sizes across each sector building effectiveness, developing leadership capability and facilitating change. Find out more at www.barrydore.com, where you can also read his weekly blog.

Is the party over- part two

Author: Jason Dunlop

General manager,
Cardiff Students' Union

Cardiff's GM with a challenge to the movement on commercial activities.

For some time I have been reading about the demise of commercial services in Students' Unions. I would like to explore, in this article, my rationale for activities which support the student experience and make a financial return on investment commercial activity.

It has always interested me, the debate about whether Unions should run commercial activities or not. It is my view that many of the commercial services we provide, actually offer as much development to people in the learning experience, as other activities which we provide. Our Bars areas allow students to meet, socialise, discuss and debate and without such facilities we would not be providing a true students experience.

When I arrived at Cardiff Students' Union in 2003, one of the clear weaknesses in our operation, was the over reliance on Bars income. I therefore set about a strategy of looking at developing other forms of income. I happened to read an article on lifecycle, on where students were spending their money and time. About the same time, I also received a report from our Advice Centre Manager on the categories of problems which they see students about. Top of the list by a long way was housing. This started the journey of the "student focused business" which for me was a new way of looking at commercial services.

The principles are very simple. There must be a proven need from students. We must be able to meet that need, from a student perspective, so that we can return our investment or better. This to me is a very simple model and one, I think, we probably all use every day in our Students' Unions. But how far do you drive these principles through your operations?

The Letting Agency model was our first and I am sure that many will have read about this service in Trading News but I just want to highlight there principles.

We then started to look at other ways in which we could develop other businesses which support the student experience. The IT shop was our next project. A provision that offered lease, sell and repair services designed for students. A service which understands their needs in actions, rather than words. An example of this from our IT shop is, if a student purchases or leases a computer or laptop from us and it fails they can walk into the shop and if it can't be fixed there and then, they are sent away with a laptop to use free of charge. We hold enough stock of spare laptops to ensure that if a student has a deadline; our computer will not be the reason why they did not achieve their objective.

Both the Lettings Agency and IT shop are not new. Others have done them and I do not want to sit in Cardiff and tell you that we have provided these services any better than others, but our services are designed and delivered for students. The use of which both services are achieving is outperforming our plans and in the current situation every new and diverse source of income is a welcome one.

We are looking at other models and will keep progressing our concepts to look at services risk with regards to both students and our organisation, but I think we all should be looking at ways in which we can define new services which provide mutual benefit.

I would be happy to discuss any of these processes or thoughts with AMSU members and Unions more widely and would also be interested to hear of the things which you are thinking about in your Union, please feel free to email me at dunlopj@cardiff.ac.uk

NUS' Student Experience Research

Author: Alex Bols
Head of Education & Quality, NUS

NUS' Education chief on the HSBC Student Experience Research.

NUS launched its Student Experience Report 2008 last November. This wide ranging research looks at UK students' experiences and expectations before and during their studies looking at all areas of student experience from the quality of their course to their post-course employment plans and from their views on their accommodation to finance issues.

NUS received funding from HSBC to carry out an annual Student Experience Survey for the next three years. Using GfK NOP, market research company, we carried out an online survey with both current and prospective students: a total of 3,135 current students and 250 prospective students were interviewed addition to two extensive qualitative research phases.

You may want to use the national data and carry out local research to benchmark your local student experience. For further advice or copies of the research questions you should get in touch with one of the team at NUS.

Overall feelings about university

74% of students said they were enjoying university. Those who were not enjoying it cited poor teaching and concerns about debt as the main reasons for this. 85% of students were pleased that they decided to go to university.

Choosing university and course

Less than a third (28%) say their main reason for going tom university was "for the experience itself". Over two-thirds (68%) saying they attend to gain qualifications, more than half (53%) saying they do so to improve their chances of getting a job, and just under half (44%) attending to "improve their earning potential".

It found that students fit in to four main categories, relating to their motivation for choosing to go to university:

- Academics - those that want to focus on learning and gaining academic skills, and are likely to go on to post-graduate study;
- Next Steppers - those with a clear career goal and have chosen their course with that in mind;
- Option Openers - do not necessarily have a clear goal, tend to select a course they believe they will enjoy and be good at;
- Toe Dippers - those attracted to university for the lifestyle, who hope to have more opportunities open to them because they have obtained a degree.

The research found differences between the reasons why students pick certain institutions. Less than half (45%) of students at research-intensive Russell Group universities picked their institution because it had "the course/subject I wanted", compared with 71% of students at the newer, post-1992 universities.

In contrast, 81% of students at Russell Group institutions said their main reason for picking their university was because of its "academic reputation", compared with just 24% of those at post-1992 universities.

But a third of students choose their university because it is the closest to home. This is especially true for students from a poorer background (53%) compared with their richer counterparts (22%).

Quality and quantity of teaching

85% rated the quality of teaching and learning as good or excellent. Students receive on average 15 contact hours a week and 16 hours of private study, although this varied by institution and subject.

The research also found a significant difference between students' perceptions in teaching quality. Students at Russell Group, or pre-1992 universities are much more likely to rate the quality of teaching they have received as good to excellent, compared to those at post-1992 institutions (89% to 82%).

Personalisation

92% of students were given the opportunity to provide feedback about their course, but only 51% of these students believed that their feedback was acted upon.

In the context of our discussions surrounding supporting the learner voice it was encouraging to see that whilst only 23% of students feel involved in shaping the content, curriculum or design of their course 57% said that they wanted such involvement.

Coursework and Feedback

25% of students had to wait more than five weeks for feedback on their coursework.

> "92% of students were given the opportunity to provide feedback about their course, but only 51% of these students believed that their feedback was acted upon."

Only 25% of students received individual verbal feedback on their assessments, compared with 71% that would want individual verbal feedback.

Accommodation

84% of students are happy with their accommodation. 55% were happy with the choice of accommodation offered by their institution; however, this was significantly affected by type of university.

Facilities and resources

Students are least satisfied by the facilities available for practical work, with only 54% saying that it meets their needs.

Student Welfare services

81% of students say that academic support partly or fully meets their needs. 26% of students say that financial advice does not meet their needs, or only partly does so.

Bullying, sexual harassment and safety

7% of students said that they had experienced bullying, but 71% of these students said that they did not report it. 12% of students had experienced crime whilst at university.

Finance, debt and the cost of living

The average cost of university life is nearly £450 a year higher than students expect. Prospective students expect more financial help than they will actually receive; 42% believe they will be entitled to a bursary to help support their studies, but only 28% actually receive one.

Student employment

46% of students who work during term time are forced to do so because their basic living costs exceed their loans. 45% of working students admit that this work is having a negative impact on their studies. A third of them are working more than 17 hours a week during term time, and 3% work more than 33 hours.

Post-course plans

46% of students responded that they would be going straight into permanent full-time employment, 34% would be looking for work, and 6% said that they had no idea what they would do once they finished their studies. 20% of final year students said that the careers advice provided by their university did not meet their needs.

Unknown Pleasures

Author: Mark Southwell
(former Education Development Worker)
and

Author: Bill Howe
(former Student Advice and Development Manager) at Leeds Metropolitan Students' Union

In our regular look back at classic AMSU articles, Mark and Bill ask "Have students' unions become glorified training agencies and lost their roots as representative organisations". Higher education, they argued, is about creating a skilled productive workforce rather than pursuing knowledge and learning for their own sake, and students' unions have in turn become obsessed with training for employability.

Have we all forgotten about having fun? Are student development practitioners ignoring students' motivations as they impose their own value on students? What do theories such as Rationalism and Empiricism tell us about how students learn through student activities?

There is evidence of 'student development' initiatives throughout higher education; the inclusion of skills and 'capability' in the curriculum; the promotion of a graduate standard programme and the accreditation of extra curricula activities. Students' unions up and down the country are also engaging I this process, employing staff, developing 'activities' centres and producing materials with, in our view, increasing uniformity and blandness.

In this essay we will attempt to challenge the current orthodoxy that defines student activities in terms of value – a value concerned with future employability. We will argue that there has been a lack of debate within the community that provides students' activities, about the theory, which underpins student development work.

The STADIA 'Piecing it all together' pack defines student development as,

" Acquiring life skills (through experience and training) that will equip students to deal with all sorts of situations and tasks for their life during, and after leaving formal education"

Whilst we support this aim we will attempt to argue that this is not as easy as it is portrayed. Our view is that the acquisition of knowledge is, a 'revelatory' process, unpredictable and individualised. Identification of these precious moments, these 'sparkles of glory', is further complicated when it comes to student activities, many of which are undertaken by

> " There has been a lack of debate within the community that provides students' activities, about the theory, which underpins student development work."

individuals primarily because of the pleasure and delight they give. We will argue the 'pleasure', a sensuous, extreme and autonomous physicality, cannot be sublimated into the values of life skills, employability and life long learning.

It is or view that we have arrived at this juncture in time with an ideological view of education that sees its role as providing multi-skilled units for the market place, what David Blunkett called 'human capital'. However, this is a recent development within higher education. Traditionally the philosophy that informed the purpose of higher education was more centred on the benefits to the individual, which in turn, it was believed, would benefit society. The Committee on Higher Education Chaired by Lord Robbins in 1963 stated,

"*we must postulate that what is taught should be taught in such a way as to promote the general powers of the mind. The aim should be to produce not mere specialists but rather cultivated men and women." (1963:6)*

The shift in emphasis can be pinpointed to almost 20 years ago. In 1979 J A Pope, a Vice Chancellor at the time, writing in the Journal of the Royal Society of Art bemoaned that,

"*This is the first time in history that Universities have been associated wit the training of 'agents' for the creation of wealth" (M Reeves 1998:2)*

Since then the 'capability' bandwagon has increased its momentum with the publication of the 'Education for Capability' manifesto in 1980 and the White Paper- 'Education: Meeting the Challenge' in 1987. Victory in this ideological battle over the purpose of higher education was confirmed with the publication of the National Committee of Inquiry in Higher Education's report, Higher Education in the learning society, published in July1997. The death of @education for education's sake' was signalled when the Committee stated that one of the four main purposes of Higher Education was:

"*to serve the needs of an adaptable, sustainable, knowledge – based economy at local, regional and national levels"*

(NCIHE, 1997:13)

Whist the Committee did acknowledge that one of the purposes of higher education is ' to increase knowledge and understanding for their own sake, this is clearly tied to the fostering of knowledge for its 'application to benefit the economy and society'. The overwhelming impression given is that the purpose of higher education is to 'train agents for the creation of wealth'. The claims that higher educational institutions are autonomous organisations and that they enjoy academic freedom can only be bought into question by such statements.

In accepting unquestioningly the need to add value to student activities, to promote 'employability', student development practitioners have failed to place themselves in the position of students who take part (and the tens of thousands that don't!!). They have failed to ask why do individuals take part. Instead they have tried to map a value system onto these activities. This denies the initial desire to take part in the activity, a desire that stems from the pleasure gained in taking part.

If the first part of our project is to expose the failure of student development practitioners to place their work within a historical context, then the second is to expose the poverty of theory that underpins their work. Yes, we can all chant the mantra of KOLB: " Concrete Experience – Observations and Reflections – Formation of Abstract Concepts and Generalisations – Testing Implications of Concepts in New Situations", but what does it mean to know something with certainty?

To examine this we have to turn to philosophy where a bifurcation exists in the theory of knowledge between what can be characterised as 'Rationalists' and 'Empiricists'. The first of these, the 'Rationalists', can be illustrated by Descartes famous dictum, 'I think therefore I am' (cogito, ergo sum). Descartes argued that this was a truth which was so certain and assured, so clear and distinctly conceived
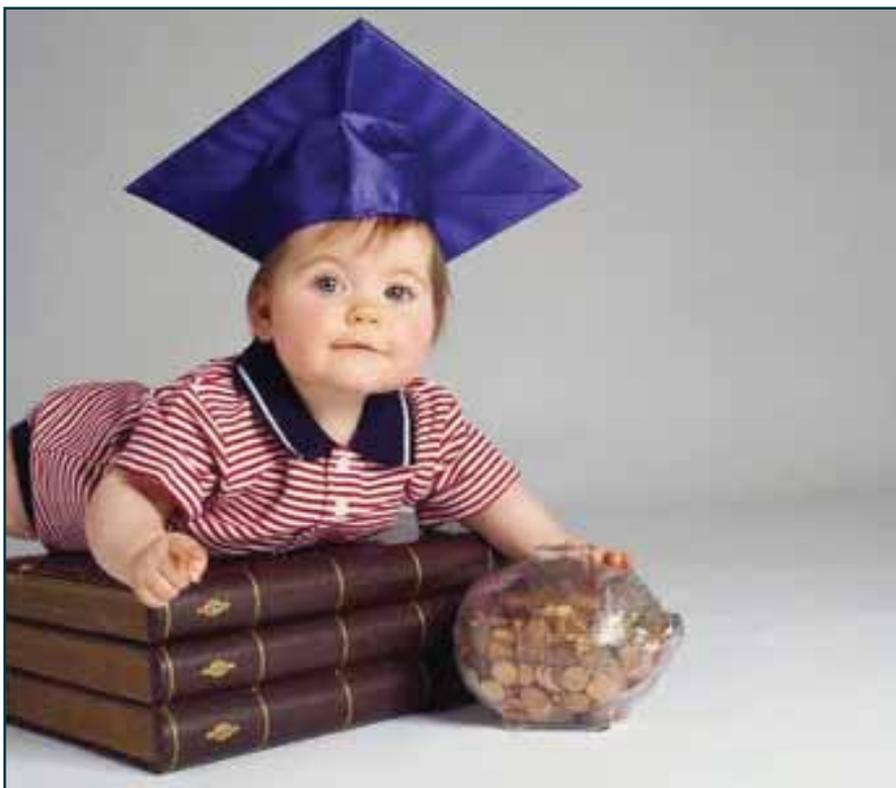
that we can therefore discover all other truths. To put it simply, the 'Rationalist's' (Plato, Descartes & Kant, etc.) theory of knowledge employs reason alone to discover knowledge in the strongest sense, knowledge that can under no circumstances be false. 'Rationalistic' theories maintain that we cannot find any absolutely certain knowledge in sense experience, but have to seek for it only in the mind.

The 'Empiricists' (John Locke, Bishop George Berkeley, David Hume, etc.) on the other hand believe that all anybody knows about of thinks about comes from experience. All our information is based upon our experience either through our senses, or by reflecting on what goes on in our minds. In Three Dialogues Between Hylas and Philonus (1713), Bishop George Berkley relates a discussion between Hylas and Philonus concerning the denial by sceptics of the real nature of things from the experience of the senses. In the second of these discussions Philonus discusses with Hylas his thoughts using the example of taste. He argues that sweet and bitter tastes are experienced as different kinds of pleasure and pain. But no one believes that sugar contains various pleasures, so the pleasant experience must be in the mind. Therefore, all knowledge comes from sense experience.

There are faults in both theories. It could be argued that there is no visible or tangible evidence for the 'Rationalist' claims. Also, if we consider the development of human knowledge, and the revolutions of human thought that have occurred throughout history, the advances in scientific knowledge and the changes in scientific theory, it is difficult to consider anything is an absolutely certain and permanent truth. 'Empiricism' has its faults too. Impressions that we gain through our senses, therefore a great deal of what we think, may be nothing but illusions. Our experience does not contain any necessary relations or connections between the various items of our sense experience. Any connections that we impose (sweet = pleasure) upon our experiences are due, not to what we see, but our mental habits or propensities.

The lack of certainty about a theory of knowledge that is both credible and consistent has profound implications for 'student activities practitioners'.

The current orthodoxy within the field is based upon 'experimental learning'. Kolb is a great tool to use, but our view is that practitioners have failed to address the issue of what, or perhaps more importantly, how, 'knowledge' is being gained in the activities they provide.

> " In accepting unquestioningly the need to add value to student activities, to promote 'employability', student development practitioners have failed to place themselves in the position of students who take part (and the tens of thousands that don't!)."

The third area we would like to focus on concerns the vehicles we use to encourage student development – student activities. There is a tendency within the student development movement to believe that all student activities are development opportunities. We would argue that this fails to take into account the extreme and autonomous physicality that is 'pleasure'. In the next section we hope to outline the need for an understanding of the 'politics of the pleasure'.

During the late 18th century and throughout the 19th century the debate about aesthetics played a significant role in creating a new ideal of human subjectivity and identity. For Terry Eagleton in his essay *'The Ideology of the Aesthetic'* this is important because,

"aesthetic, at least in its original formulations has little to do with art. It denoted instead a whole programme of social, psychical and political reconstruction…"

(Eagleton 1992:17)

Its territory is nothing less than,

"the whole of our sensate life – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of what takes root in the guts and the gaze and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world"

(Eagleton, 1992:19)

Eagleton has identified that this 'political reconstruction' was played out in the discourse about 'manners', virtue and beauty. His argument is valuable because he identifies that aesthetic pleasure can represent a challenge to the dominant modes of thinking even as it brings about a soothing resolution to political tensions and problems.

We would argue that we can see this struggle being contested within students' unions. Historically the debate about pleasure has been divided. On one hand there have been the 'hedonists', those believe that pleasures and value are identical, and on the other, 'moralists' who have argued that pleasure should coincide with moral or ethical value, i.e. that pleasure and value are distinct. Our view is that student development practitioners can be characterised as 'moralists'. They have attempted to add value to student activities- employability, capability, key skills, life long learning – and have failed to recognise the pure unruliness, the extreme and autonomous physicality that is pleasure. The problem however with attempting to sublimate pleasure, and assert value is that,

"abtract systems of moral value can always be unmasked as forms of pleasure and gratification" (Connor 1993:218)

We would therefore argue that there is a need for student development practitioners to recognise, and pay close attention to the exchanges between pleasure and value when they plan activities. Our view is that

there is a need to assert the value of pleasure in itself, which seems the only way it can be rescued from the sublimation of bourgeois aesthetics. However, there also needs to be resistance towards notions of pure pleasure, as there should be towards pure value. In other words, there needs to be a recognition that the reason individuals take part in activities are complex and diverse which often do not involve the deferred gratification of increased future employment prospects.

Finally, we would argue that most students' union constitutions define the aims of their organisation as; to represent and communicate the interests of their members, to provide sporting, educational, recreational and cultural opportunities for their members. We would like to question where employability, the development of key skills, lifelong learning, the creation of adaptable, transformative individuals fits into these aims.

> " The lack of certainty about a theory of knowledge that is both credible and consistent has profound implications for 'student activities practitioners'. "

Our view is that though these may be by-products of individuals' activities, they should not be the driving-force behind the provision of such activities. In focusing on providing 'agents for the creation of wealth', in promoting self-interest rather than the interests of the membership as a whole, we are losing sight of the primary aims of students' unions, to represent their members' interests. Whilst we will acknowledge that students' unions may not be the radical organisations they were, surely they are more than glorified training agencies.

Our view is that the student development movement offers exciting and innovative opportunities for individuals and students' unions. However, to fully utilise these opportunities, there is a need for students' unions and student development practitioners to begin, through the development of a set of ethics and principles that informs their work, and through a theoretical framework that underpins their practice, to create a new identity that is separate and distinct from their institutions, one which will enable them to thrive and prosper as we move into the next millennium.

Building on ability and aspiration

Author: Wes Streeting
President, National Union of Students

NUS' campaigner in chief on access and admissions in HE .

There are many demands on the time of an NUS President – many more than I ever understood. It means I can't get involved in all the policy areas I used to work on as Vice-President Education, which I suppose is just the way it goes.

But admissions policy is an exception. I am still very close to the issues involved, and I'm determined to stay close to them during my time as NUS President. We all know why those issues are so important. Decisions about who comes to study in the institutions represented here are central to determining the character of those institutions, more so than mission statements and strategic plans ever could be. And on the human level, for the applicant, every admissions decision could be anything from an unexpected and amazing new opportunity, to a shattered dream. So the way we conduct our admissions system really matters.

The title of my contribution to this edition of agenda is, I think, quite instructive to my thinking about how we should try to develop admissions to higher education. Building on ability and aspiration. And that is precisely the challenge we now have in front of us.

We know that there is no shortage of ability out there. The admission rate for young people with two or more A-levels is already almost ninety-five percent, and every year,

tens of thousands of adult learners enter higher education on the basis of their professional experience.

It is true that attainment at level three remains a major barrier to participation, and let's take it as axiomatic that in some areas many young people don't achieve what they are really capable of and are not adequately prepared for higher education. This is a huge problem, and the higher education admissions system can't correct it – we all know this, but we shouldn't allow ourselves to become obsessed with it, or allow it to become an excuse. We should focus on what we can do.

I also think there is no shortage of aspiration out there. You might find that surprising, but I do believe that there is too much said about a perceived poverty of aspiration which is largely mythical. Young people in deprived areas do, in fact, really want to get a better job, live in a better flat, and in many cases – provide more for their family. I dislike the language of poverty of aspiration because it seems to suggest that the biggest problem is in the mentality of the non-applicant.

I simply don't think that's true. There are much bigger, structural problems that have nothing to do with the individual applicant and their circumstances. But again, we

> " Higher education should be about the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and should be the site of independent-minded scholarship in our rapidly changing society. But it should also be an engine room for social transformation."

shouldn't become obsessed with the language of this, and we should concentrate on what we can actually do.

Instead of talking about poverty of aspiration, we should do more to tackle and make adjustments for other poverties suffered by many people in our society.

• A poverty of good advice and guidance to support people making choices about their education.

- A poverty of cultural capital, which makes it hard for people to achieve admission, or even to see how they can approach it.

And what about actual, basic poverty? The reality that many people lack the means to meet the 'opportunity cost' of effective participation in the admissions process. Or perhaps the real issue is that other people have the resources to purchase additional support to assist them – creating a strong relative advantage for those people.

I think there are things that can be done to alleviate, or at least alleviate the effects of, all three of these poverties as they relate to the admission process.

To tackle the poverty of guidance, we could adopt an approach that tests how every applicant has been advised prior to making an application – not a central, overly

" We need to rethink the way we view the admissions debate"

bureaucratic system, but make it the responsibility of every school to keep a record of how its applicants have sought advice. Just by doing this, we could identify people who are struggling and also make

judgments about how effective our advice services really are.

Information, advice and guidance is a hugely challenging area, and I know that it is finally getting some attention within government, which is promising. The time is right to make clear how we think the situation can be improved, and ask for broad commitment to doing something about it. And it's clear that this has to be a fully cross-sectoral project with schools and further education, if it I going to get better – so it's tough work.

To tackle the poverty of cultural capital, I think we can do the most directly. I was impressed by the announcement that nine Russell Group institutions will collaborate to make admission through non-traditional routes easier through mutual recognition of access courses, and by interviewing applicants with exceptional potential that might not be reflected in actual exam performance. We can also progress work on post-qualification admissions, which I remain a strong supporter of on basic grounds of fairness, but also because it gives people more confidence if they apply with the security of qualifications under their belt.

And we have to go further than this. For applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds, it is the cultural gap, rather than their own ambition, that holds them back. How to dress for an interview. How to speak effectively to make a point. These can be serious challenges, hard to overcome. Higher education can't go back and change people's backgrounds, but it can adopt admissions practices that make them less significant, and cut through cultural barriers. Sometimes I think we should be more experimental and take a few more risks.

And clearly, the people here now are not really in a position to tackle basic economic poverty. That is the job of government, and we know that deep poverty from childhood is a major priority for this government. But I hope we can see more specific measures to support higher education admission, if you can't easily afford to travel to an open day, let alone access specialist support and coaching for application and interview.

That would be a really radical idea – a new, means-tested grant for applicants, available even before a place has been secured. Not easy to do, of course, but worth thinking about.

There are some ambitious ideas here, and I hope that we can keep an open mind to new approaches. But I think that the sector is improving its approach to admissions all the time, and that work is making a real difference to applicants every year. Every time something is developed to make even one aspect of the admissions process fairer, we make the system as a whole a little bit more fair. That is worth doing, and worth continuing in the future.

But there is a lot more to do. It won't surprise you to hear me say that, and I have outlined some areas where I think we can make further improvements. There is a strong case for doing so. Higher education should be about the pursuit of knowledge for its own sake and should be the site of independent-minded scholarship in our rapidly changing society. But it should also be an engine room for social transformation.

I know there are some people who don't agree with that – but I think most people do, and we shouldn't be afraid to talk about the sector in those terms. No aspect of our policy or practice should impede the role higher education can play in driving social progress. Admission is clearly an area that is crucial to this aim.

More than that though, I think these are compatible ideas. You don't have to have one or the other. The most qualified applicants are not always the most gifted, or the most interesting. The most exciting ideas in history were never born out of wealth or privilege, and they won't be in the future, either. How many of those great ideas might we be deprived of, if we don't make higher education open to all who could make a contribution to it?

We need to take on, most of all, the idea that we are letting too many people into higher education in the first place. We've all heard attacks on the expansion of the sector, and I've certainly heard it recently.

Colleagues who are involved in admissions are at the sharp end of that criticism, and we should have the confidence to take it on. We should challenge preconceptions of what higher education is, and argue that if we really want a learning society we need more even more people to participate.

> " In education, it shouldn't matter who you put in: it's who comes out that counts."

Last term's announcement that student numbers will be restricted next year is worrying in the short term. But it isn't a crisis. We will continue expansion of the higher education experience through structural change: more short courses, more part-time study, and more innovation in modes of delivery. It's these changes that enable more people to come in, and do it in a sustainable way.

Because of this, we need to rethink the way we view the admissions debate. Much of the focus of the widening participation agenda is on the student profile of the 'selecting' universities, and that's fine. But I want to say, because it doesn't get said often enough: let's hear more about the recruiting universities. We should be actively people seeking to come back into learning, based on the idea that some higher education will be a good thing for almost anyone, and a good thing for our culture and society. You could call it a proactive admissions policy. What matters is ensuring that there is wide choice and that people make the right choices for them.

There are practical things we can do, from the top of the league table to the bottom, to make admissions fairer. I've mentioned some of them above, and students' unions have a crucial role in taking those things forward.

But there's something even more important here. Let's challenge the moral panic that clamours around student numbers and academic standards. We should, to use a Daily Mailism, open the floodgates – and be proud of it.

In education, it shouldn't matter who you put in: it's who comes out that counts.

The Importance of Partnerships in our Neighbourhoods

Author: Sarah Wayman
Research & Policy Officer, NUS

NUS' welfare researcher on studentification and what unions can do.

Once again the debate over 'studentification' and where students 'should live' hit the headlines this year. The experience that residents face, in areas with a high concentration of students, differs from neighbourhood to neighbourhood, street to street. However, some policy makers are looking to identify 'quick fix' legislative solutions which will not tackle the root cause of the problem and will simply alienate students and other residents. Further legislation will not address the problems that poor planning has created in certain areas. NUS believes that only by working in partnership can some of the real problems faced in communities be tackled.

The year began with an announcement from the then Housing and Planning Minister Yvette Cooper of a major review to improve the private rented sector by Julie Rugg and David Rhodes of the Centre for Housing Policy at the University of York. The consultation followed in March, and by April NUS was invited to a seminar discussing yet another piece of research on the private rented sector commissioned by the Department of Communities and Local Government (CLG) run by an independent research organisation, ECOTEC.

We responded to both consultations, in addition to meeting with our members to debate the issues and speaking to CLG and the Department of Innovation, Universities and Skills (DIUS) to ensure that the student voice was being heard at a national level.

Despite our concerns with the ECOTEC report, which responded directly to calls from various lobby groups for a change in the Use Classes Order making student housing subject to planning permission, it was encouraging to see that both reports suggested partnership work as an option for moving forward. Indeed this was the main recommendation of the Rugg review which we welcomed as a 'victory for common sense'.

So, why is partnership work so important? We see too often when tensions build in the community discussions quickly develop into a blame game. Students are blamed for

> " We see too often when tensions build in the community discussions quickly develop into a blame game."

seemingly all drunken behaviour; landlords are blamed for the state of housing and litter in the area; local authorities are blamed for not 'dealing' with the issues; institutions are blamed for encouraging students to the area in the first place. The list could go on. However, this blame culture fails to tackle the issues that are clearly evident in

some areas. It is vital that all parties take collective responsibility for their community and begin thinking constructively on how things can be improved rather than simply washing our hands of the issue.

It is important that all groups in the community engage and work together. We have reflected this on a national level, meeting and speaking to various groups including Universities UK (UUK), DIUS, CLG, students' unions, local authorities, landlords and residents. Sometimes, opinions will differ, but that can't be allowed to detract from our common goals, of making cohesive neighbourhoods. We need to work with good landlords and accreditation schemes to champion those businesses in the sector that can visibly improve the living environment of everyone.

We need to work with local authorities and share information about key services. We need to work with other students' unions in the area – these issues affect all students, not just one specific cohort. And we need break down barriers with other residents and show that students do want to be an active part of the community.

When we've spoken to students' unions, it's been encouraging to hear about the excellent work that's being done up and down the country to help foster happy, harmonious communities.

On the strategic level, an increasing number of community officer roles are in place that can facilitate partnership between different stakeholders and the students' union. Whilst Reading University and the students' union carried out a piece of research investigating transitions of students from University accommodation to the private rented sector. Leeds University Union has developed a community strategy that has strengthened communication internally around these issues and importantly prioritised time and resources in this area of work for their staff and officers. We've

also heard of lots of unions encouraging their officers to attend community meetings and some, including Cambridge University, holding their residents meetings on campus.

At the grassroots, the activities are too numerous to mention. It's simply not the case that students don't invest time and care in their communities. In several unions, schemes are being developed to recruit volunteers to act as 'reps' or 'wardens' in their localities. There are students' unions and instructions all over the country organising events to 'clean up' certain areas. Sometimes these are organised exclusively by volunteering societies or in conjunction with local residents' groups or local authorities. Swansea Union teamed up with a local voluntary service 'Discovery' earlier this year to clear rubbish from gardens, paint window sills and doors, fix fences and plant shrubs, whilst Leeds University Union ran it's largest 'Green Streets' to date. And it's not just the façade of the local community; from one off events like Queens University students organising a street tea party for local residents to Bath Students' Union running a mentoring

scheme to help pupils in local schools to overcome their barriers to learning. Liverpool Guild of Students run a fortnightly stall for their volunteer centre to come and promote local opportunities that students can get involved in.

We need to learn from these examples and the many more that we see across the student movement. We all need to take responsibility; it is our neighbourhood after all. It can be all too easy to wash our hands of these issues, which admittedly will not be solved over night, and blame someone else. But, it's in all our interests to meet the needs of those living locally, and as students' unions we should be trying to be exemplary in that.

NUS will shortly publish a joint report with UUK on partnership working between students' unions and institutions. If you have any additional best practice you would like to contribute to our publications please get in touch at neighbourhood@nus.org.uk

For further information:
www.officeronline.co.uk/welfare/
www.nus.org.uk

Thinking things through - Welcome to the jungle

Author: Graeme Wise

Political Officer, NUS

NUS' resident policy wonk Graeme Wise on unpacking Widening Participation as an agenda.

Looking for 'the answer' to widening participation in higher education is like looking for the source of the Nile. One only has to consider the expansive review of research literature by Gorard et al. (2006) to realise that just navigating the subject is expeditionary in scale, and Watson reinforces this in a related commentary, writing that: "the field is so cluttered with non-commensurate, non-replicable research that anyone with a strongly held opinion can find a research study to back it up" (Watson 2006: 2). It seems that the only way you can get to the source is to take a machete to the undergrowth. Gorard et al. considered doing this, but reason pragmatically that if they had, "there would have been almost nothing to review" (Gorard et al. 2006: 115).

Perhaps one of the major causes of this

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incoherence is the contested meaning of "widening participation". Gorard et al. conclude that "the terms 'access' and 'widening participation' are in common use, but they do not have a clear or shared meaning" (2006: 119). Stuart (2000) argues that there are at least three different discourses of widening participation: a discourse of massification, a discourse of exclusion, and a discourse of active citizenship. The term "widening" can relate mainly to pure expansion, or it can relate to notions of corrective social justice for 'disadvantaged' individuals, or it can imply a process wider change in cultural and social structures.

Beyond discourse, there is a problem with definition, and measurement. Should we look at the proportion of entrants from NS-SEC groups 4/5/6, or the number of applicants from deprived wards? What about ethnicity, which is an important factor, but also strongly affected by socio-geographic distributions? What do we ask about gendered subject choices? What about age, where you cannot even define what under-representation might be, or disability, which an enormously diverse

factor of disadvantage – and in many cases might not act as a disadvantage at all?

Whitson (2005) argues that the single most important determining factor continues to be attainment, and indeed that "in some ways the links between class, social disadvantage and educational attainment are closer and more influential than ever… this matters because educational inequalities are not an accidental by-product of social structures but are actively produced and reproduced" (Whitson 2005: 123). Applicants from disadvantaged backgrounds have qualifications that do not stand up to the average attainment rates elsewhere, and this is associated with social conditions such as poverty, overburdened schools, and lower parental educational attainment. These factors are cyclical and therefore they reproduce themselves across generational boundaries, just as their opposites reproduce wealth and high achievement. It would be naïve to think that some forces in our society are unaware of the implications of this, and just under the surface (or even above it, as in the pages of the Daily Mail, for example) it is easy to find attitudes to WP that can be summed up thus: 'you can have anything you want, but you'd better not take it from me'.

Strategic direction: what is being done, and why isn't it enough?

The practical result of this moral panic is an unwillingness to deny access to some well-off people to create the space for more talented poor people, and this in turn means that change is moving at a tortuous pace. On the most basic measures, we can conclude that, whatever widening participation is, it is happening very slowly, and progress is faltering. The Higher Education Initial Participation Rate has crept up by 4% since 1999-2000, and the performance indicators for widening participation show that the average improvement, between 2002-3 and 2005-6, across the three key

indicators (state sector entrants, entrants from lower socio-economic groups, and entrants from low participation neighbourhoods), has been around one percentage point. Both raw expansion and demographic change are too slow. If we needed any further evidence of the scale of the inequality that remains, we

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" For any kind of progressive project in higher education to be sustained, it must soon require profound change in the very nature of the higher education 'product', rather than relying on the stimulation of demand or the setting aside of perceived barriers."

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would only need to look as far as the differential young progression rates for Parliamentary constituencies: in Sheffield Brightside it's 8%, while in Kensington and Chelsea it is 69% (Reed et al. 2007).

We know, however, that an enormous amount of work is being done, and billions have been spent. It is possible to separate the work being done on widening participation into three broad types. These groupings should not be taken as a rigorous taxonomy; indeed, there are aspects of the present widening participation agenda that can be seen as crossing these boundaries.

The first 'level' of work is that which takes place 'at the surface', in the form of

interventions that seek to stimulate HE progression amongst WP target groups, within existing structures, systems, and modes of provision, and also in forms such as advice and guidance for applicants, professional development of practitioners, or similar. The prime examples of such intervention are the AimHigher programme and Lifelong Learning Networks. The former aims to 'raise aspirations' amongst groups of disadvantaged young people, so that they are more likely to apply to HE, while the latter aims to improve progression opportunities by establishing progression agreements between institutions and improving information, advice and guidance for potential entrants. There also is a wide range of more local and specific projects, such as summer schools, which seek to give young people a 'taster' of HE over a week long residential course.

The second 'level' relates to limited structural change, which might be designed to remove or ameliorate certain barriers to access, or make HE application easier or more equitable. Lifelong Learning Networks work across this level, by promoting curriculum development to facilitate progression. More concrete examples might include the creation of new types of qualification to open up new routes through HE, most notably the development of the Foundation Degree, or the introduction of UCAS (though the latter of these preceded the current WP agenda). Financial support has also be shaped to support WP objectives, for example by giving non-repayable grants on a means-tested basis, so that more support is directed towards those from disadvantaged backgrounds, making the transition easier for those people.

The third 'level' is more quixotic. In practice, it is also concerned with structural change, but to a more profound degree. It might affect the content of the curriculum, the nature of pedagogy, or even question the purpose of higher

education itself. It can be taken to include consideration, for example, of the proportion of provision that is based on part-time study, the expectations for time taken to complete particular qualifications, the locations where study takes place, the possibility of building a qualification from many different providers, and the quantity of higher education that we hope individuals will undertake during their life.

Towards a radical approach

I would argue that the prime reason for our slow progress is that we are obsessed with the first level of action, have underplayed the second level of action, and cannot bring ourselves to confront the third. Projects that operate at the surface make a real difference to the individuals involved, and do indeed change lives for the better – but not enough of them.

Going further than this is fraught with immense practical and philosophical difficulties. Do we support a meritocratic approach (cherry-picking the best), or a democratic approach (seeking to make the HE available to all)? Do we think that widening participation is 'an HE problem' at all (given the weight of evidence demonstrating pretty clearly that the roots of inequality are much deeper, directing us to primary schools, early years, or even parenting), or do we think HE has a duty to attempt social correction? Most controversially, real change necessitates the asking of truly big questions. What is higher education for? More pertinently still, who is it for – learners or researchers, individuals or society, the many or the few?

I would contend that, on questions like these, almost no consensus exists within student organisations – indeed, they are questions that we do not attempt to ask in any kind of serious way. And yet, they must be asked, because if the aims of this strategic cycle are to embed widening participation within the strategies of all HEIs, then to go further

than this the aims in the next cycle will surely have to breach the more challenging levels of change. For any kind of progressive project in higher education to be sustained, it must soon require profound change in the very nature of the higher education 'product', rather than relying on the stimulation of demand or the setting aside of perceived barriers. It must also swing the spotlight from the individual ('preparing' them better, raising their 'aspirations', and so on), on to the structure, machinery and ethos of higher education. This would constitute a radical approach. In a future column, I hope to discuss some ideas about how this might be pursued. In the meantime, any comment or critique from Agenda readers will be gratefully received and may well inform future work at NUS – so get in touch.

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Postgraduate and research issues

Author: Alex Bols

Head of Education & Quality, NUS

In the latest in a series of education articles, Alex focuses on postgraduates and research.

Stats about postgraduates

Around a quarter of all higher education students study postgraduate qualifications. According to the 2006/07 HESA statistics there are 559,390 postgraduate students in the UK. It is interesting to note that of these students more study part-time than full-time - 316,320 part-time compared to the 243,070 studying full-time.

There are also significant numbers of international students that study at the postgraduate level. 375,145 of postgraduates are from the UK, 48,025 are from other European Union countries and 136,220 are from non-EU countries.

Between 1994/95 and 2006/07 there was a significant increase in postgraduate student numbers. Overall numbers have increased by 67% from 335,325. Full-time numbers have increased more rapidly than part-time numbers. Full-time have increased by 87% from 129,711 and part-time have increased by 54% from 205,614.

It is however important to note that whilst overall numbers of postgraduates has increased the numbers of postgraduate research students has stayed quite static. Within this there have been decreases in some strategically important subjects with

PGR numbers decreasing by 11% in biology and 9% in chemistry between 2001/02 and 2005/06. The numbers overall have been held steady by an increase in the number of international students – posing challenges to these departments if international students drop and more generally to the future of academia in this country.

Overall postgraduate student numbers by UK nation:

England	462,435
Wales	27,665
Scotland	59,030
Northern Ireland	10,270

Postgraduates also study a variety of different qualifications. Taught Masters make up over half the total numbers (50.8% of all qualifications), doctorate degree mainly by research (16.8%) and

postgraduate diploma or certificate (not PGCE) (15.3%).

Postgraduate taught students

The Higher Education Academy has done some research into the experience of taught postgraduate students. Overall levels of satisfaction amongst taught postgraduates is high with 81% saying that their experience met or exceeded their expectations.

This high overall satisfaction does however mask differences in response to different areas with, for example, 59% thinking that the teaching and learning on their course is consistently high with 21% disagreeing and only 58% agreeing that they received sufficient contact time.

Feedback on assessment

The Survey also identified feedback on assessment as an issue for taught postgraduate students with only 44%

agreeing and 33% disagreeing that they had received continuous feedback on progress and also 46% agreeing and 33% disagreeing that they had received prompt feedback.

NUS' Great Feedback Amnesty has been identifying examples of good and bad practice in feedback and we have produced a briefing with case studies on how students' unions have campaigned to improve feedback. NUS has also developed 10 principles for feedback which can be used as guiding principles in developing feedback systems.

International students

International students had many reasons for choosing to study in the UK. Nearly half (46%) of international students agreed that the reputation of the institution within their subject area had played a role in their choice of where to study. A third (36%) wanted to have a UK degree, and for a quarter of students the most important factors were a desire to improve their English (28%) and the shortness of courses in UK (28%). But it is interesting to not that just 21% wanted to work in the UK after graduation.

Of the students whose first language was not English, 29% said that they had needed extra language support. Nearly two-thirds (64%) of those who received support agreed that it had been appropriate to their needs, and a similar proportion (68%) agreed that it had been good for general language skills, but they had needed more help with the academic language related to their programme.

Postgraduate research students

Supervision

IThe Higher Education Academy also undertakes a student experience survey for postgraduate research students, the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey (PRES). The next set of results will be published in December. Satisfaction levels were high for research degree students with 81% saying that

their programme as a whole met or exceeded their expectations.

One of the key areas of concern that the survey identified relates to supervision. In the PRES respondents considered supervision to be the most important aspect in successfully completing their research degree programme. The survey also showed that a fifth of respondents thought supervision did not meet expectations. There were some concerns about guidance with literature searches.

> " One of the key areas of concern that the survey identified relates to supervision."

NUS are jointly sponsoring a PhD with Birkbeck College on religious issues on campus and as a result I have recently become a joint supervisor of a PhD student, along with two Professors from Birkbeck. It has been a really interesting experience so far and will be interesting to consider the issues relating to supervision from a first hand perspective as we progress through the PhD'ship. So far we have gone through the process of applying for funding from the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC), advertising and recruiting for the PhD and at the beginning of October met with the PhD student for the first time to discuss the PhD in more detail and discuss issues such as the plan over the three years, suggested reading and possible areas to investigate further.

Postgrads that teach

Postgraduate research students are often expected to teach undergraduates. Whilst this is a welcome source of experience and income for these postgrads it is important to ensure that they are properly supported and provided with training. This teaching should not clash with the research and academic requirements of their own study. For more information about postgrads that teach see the Employment Charter that NUS developed with UCU and NPC.

Electronic theses

The British Library is undertaking a project to make PhD theses available electronically. Electronic Theses Online System (EThOS) will enable anyone to access the full text of electronically stored UK theses through their website. The aim is to ensure a high level of national and international visibility for UK postgraduate theses and dissertations. Also see EI/08/033 for more information about the project.

Research Funding

Research in the UK is funded through the dual support system with researchers applying for funding for specific research projects to the various research councils and the funding for "blue-skies" research through the HEFCE Quality Research (QR) stream. It is interesting to note with all the media coverage about the Research Assessment Exercise (RAE) and reforms to this system that actually the RAE affects the £1.47bn of research funding allocated through QR compared to the £2.8bn allocated through the research councils.

We are in the process of a RAE at the moment where the research profiles of departments in institutions are rated. The last one occurred in 2001. Around £5 billion of research funds were distributed in response to the results of the 2001 RAE. The RAE Ratings range

amsu
the association for managers in students' unions

from 1 to 5*, according to how much of the work is judged to reach national or international levels of excellence.

The results of the RAE 2008 were published in December 2008 and these results were then the basis of the resource allocation, see Education Information 09/004 for more information.

NUS Postgraduate Work

NUS is doing an increasing amount of work on postgraduate issues, passing funding at Annual Conference to appoint a new staff member to research the issues facing postgraduates. NUS is holding a first Postgraduate Conference in June to look at the many policy areas affecting postgraduate students which will elect a National Postgraduate Committee including two representatives to the National Executive Council.

NUS is currently in discussions with the National Postgraduate Committee looking at ways in which we can improve the representation of postgraduate students at the national level.

For more information:

NUS Postgraduate and Research Policy Corner:

www.officeronline.co.uk//education/articles/275653.aspx

HEA Taught Postgraduate Student Experience:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/surveys/PGTSurvey.pdf

HEA Postgraduate Research Experience Survey 2007:

www.heacademy.ac.uk/assets/York/documents/ourwork/research/surveys/pres/PRES.pdf

Research Councils UK: www.rcuk.ac.uk/

Vitae: www.vitae.ac.uk/

NUS Great Feedback Amnesty:
www.officeronline.co.uk//education/articles/275707.aspx

Partnership development with the Chartered Management Institute

Author: Joff Cooke
Plymouth GM
and
Author: Janice Allen-Brade
Faculty of Business and Law, LJM

Plymouth's GM on a partnership inspired by attendance at AMSU Conference.

Since attending a session at AMSU Conference in Strathclyde on the Chartered Management Institute, the University of Plymouth Students' Union has been in lengthy discussion with CMI on developing our relationship. The attraction of the work for UPSU was developed when the Institute showed that it was prepared spend time with us and listening to the specific needs of our business, and has responded positively and productively to everything that we have discussed. A number of exciting and coherent initiatives have come out of these discussions that will be launched in the coming year.

Firstly, the adoption of the CMI qualifications and standards as the framework for our management development within our staff team will give a logical and very affordable progression for all our staff. This includes extending formal qualification

opportunities to our student supervisors for the first time. Awards begin at Level 2 in Team Leading which can be achieved very simply and easily as a normal part of the current training for our student supervisors and at very little cost, but huge perceived benefit to our staff.

We are also developing pathways for our sabbatical officers who will leave us next year with Level 5 awards in Leadership, and membership of CMI – something which they are all very happy about. Awards in Team Leading are being developed for our volunteer leaders and wider student officers as well. Interest and potential take up is looking very good. In fact we have had to create a whole new training department to manage the initiatives, it is proving that popular

At the top level, the expectation for the senior managers to aim to achieve Chartered Manager status has already been achieved. Three senior managers at UPSU have achieved Chartered Manager status with the last expected this month. This has been possible for us by CMI developing a new approach to assessment via the "Experiential

Route". As CMI put it themselves:-

"The Experiential Route to Membership is a process for those who do not hold a formal management qualification approved for entry to Membership and Chartered Manager, but who are experienced managers and wish to join the Institute at Member grade or above.

Within this process, we will evaluate your management experience & learning in relation to Providing Direction, Working with People, Facilitating Change and Personal Development against the requirements of Member or Fellow grade."

This fitted the needs of UPSU senior managers perfectly. However it was also decided to take a advantage of a further opportunity offered by CMI where the experience portfolio for each manager was developed via "professional discussion" with an external consultant who then produced the personal portfolios and submitted them to the Institute for ratification.

Essentially the process involves some short but intense preparation of evidence under the guidance of the CMI appointed coach who them visits each

manager for a gruelling but rewarding 4 hour interview in your workplace. If this is passed then a final assessment interview takes place to verify your work. The process has been incredibly rewarding for the managers involved and also means that the officers now have a consistent external standard by which they can assure themselves that their managers are up to scratch!

We are very excited about developing even more opportunities with CMI in the future and would hope that by sharing this with colleagues that others will find the CMI services worth exploring. We are aware that Liverpool SU has also been working on other pilots with CMI that will help SUs offer similar accredited development routes for students.

At a time when we are all seeking ways to prove that students' unions can have a positive impact on the development of the employability of the graduates of our relative institutions, UPSU believes that this partnership will work well for us. The University of Plymouth are now working much more closely with us as a major partner in developing its wider student accreditation for extra-curricular and co-curricular work; something that would not have happened a year ago.

Success for us will be when that first person travels from being a Volunteer Project Leader achieving a CMI Level 2 Award in Team Leading, through to Level 5 as a sabbatical officer, and then to being a Chartered Manager in a senior role in their chosen career. We will then truly have achieved our vision of 'transforming lives through experience'.

Liverpool Business School (LBS), Liverpool John Moores University (LJMU) is pleased to announce that it has received Approved Centre status from the Chartered Management Institute (CMI), 'the only chartered professional body for management and leadership'. Approved Centre status permits LBS to deliver and assess CMI qualifications.

Currently, LBS is piloting a scheme which allows sandwich year placement students to study for the CMI Level 5 Certificate in Management and Leadership. Through this initiative LBS students will gain new and invaluable skills, thereby making them more attractive to future employers. This year, LBS has piloted the scheme with Lucy Warlow-Jones, Joel Stevenson and Ruth Townsend, who between them are studying Business Studies and Marketing respectively. The students are placed within the Representation & Democracy staff team at Liverpool Students Union (LSU).

The Representation & Democracy Co-ordinator role has been a varied and challenging one for the students, during which they have been required to work with, and promote, a new Course Representative system within the University. This has largely involved identifying stakeholder needs, negotiating with diverse groups of people, building support for a new system, and motivating students to engage with it. In just a short period of time, the students have already begun identifying positive changes achieved by Course Reps through the work they have been carrying out. Additionally, they have provided a range of support for elected officers and student groups, whilst working on a range of individual projects to the benefit of their studies and the University.

Ruth Townsend commented that "my placement here at LSU has been a unique opportunity and has really put me ahead of the game now in the graduate market. Since I arrived at LSU I have been given a real chance to gain so many new and practical work skills. I know that by the time the placement is finished there will be many things that I achieved to take away with me."

The students have enjoyed additional benefits for not only have they had the opportunity to develop their own knowledge and skills but they have also had access to a range of CMI resources and networking opportunities.

Lucy Warlow-Jones says, "I am so delighted to be doing the CMI Level 5 Certificate in Management and Leadership as part of my course, and I am thinking ahead to when I become a graduate; I have experienced how useful the CMI is and can be. I also feel really lucky to be one of the first placement students to have this opportunity, and I hope that this is something that other students can benefit from in the future."

This is not the only initiative which has benefited from collaborative working between LBS and the CMI. LJMU has also become the first UK academic institution to have devolved status for awarding Chartered Manager. Chartered Manager, which provides recognition of professional manager status, has been integrated within the Executive MBA at Liverpool Business School, so that students joining the programme may gain the dual award on successful completion of the programme.

Liverpool Business School is continually exploring new ways in which it can improve the employability of its graduates and it places considerable emphasis on the practical nature of its programmes. The School is delighted to be working in partnership with the CMI and sees this as an important step towards offering LBS students additional value through professional qualifications that will develop and enhance their management and leadership skills.

Endgame - what on earth are learners learning?

Author: Jim Dickinson
Director of Campaigns and Strategy, NUS

To close this edition Jim reflects on the assumptions we hold about learning- and why they matter.

One of the tentative themes for this edition was supposed to be "learning", and in putting it together I've learned a few things myself. These include things like discovering that the unreliability of contributors is directly proportional to the shortness of time until Christmas; and that giving up smoking is incredibly difficult when people around you seem to want to use it as an opportunity to pay you back for all the sarcasm you've shown them in recent years.

But I've also learned a few things about learning itself; and the ridiculous assumptions that we hold about it inside higher education. You see, the basic assumptions that we have about learning, and the extent to which we transmit and affirm those assumptions has fundamental effects on the way we speak for students- and so we'd be wise to test a few of them out. A forthcoming paper on Lifelong Learning by Frank Coffield at the Institute of Education asks some tough questions about these assumptions.

" The second common assumption is
that higher level or higher status
learning is concerned
with the mind,
not the body"

Take this first one- that learning is some kind of product, where we put "stuff" into "vessels". This is what has been called the 'folk theory' of learning- where we identify packages of knowledge or skills, and transmit them into the head (or body) of the learner. The success of the process gets determined by how effectively that "stuff" has been acquired. We should ask ourselves whether we really believe that this is how learning works before we readily accept this as a basis for discussion about it.

The second common assumption is that higher level or higher status learning is concerned with the mind, not the body. For years, especially in the UK, we have assumed a clear split between mind and body, closely linked to the long-standing divide between vocational/practical learning and academic learning. It underlies the curiously English superiority attributed to the more 'purely' academic. In most circumstances, our ability to articulate understanding, orally or in written text, is seen as the prime measure of effective learning. And across our culture, we somehow value this academic "mind" learning often as an acceptable proxy for more base obsessions with class and social "fit".

The third is that learning is something you do when you are young. The consequence is educational programmes, institutions and organisations are all fashioned on the assumption that if young people are given enough opportunities to learn, the job of education has somehow been done. The truth of course lasts much longer, and requires sustained

effort and investment as society continues to change at a rapid pace.

Just these three assumptions have a remarkable hold over us- consider the extent to which, as you read them back, you emotionally agree with them but rationally question them.

Coffield goes onto argue that a real focus on "lifelong learning" will eventually require us to focus in different ways on different kinds of assumptions:

• "It would place much greater emphasis on the learning of adults, at all stages of their lives. It would develop mechanisms for facilitating access to education for older students, especially for supporting those whose earlier learning experiences had been unenjoyable and unsuccessful.

• "It would focus less narrowly on measured, target-related, outcomes by accepting and celebrating partial successes rather than castigating partial failures; by encouraging richer, more creative, learning environments; and by engaging far more in the encouragement and support of learning than in its control and prescription.

• "It would reduce the damaging effects of the currently pervasive audit culture by replacing mechanistically utilitarian assessment regimes with inspection frameworks and funding mechanisms which take a more holistic view of learning.

• "It would provide a career and educational guidance service responsive to people of all ages and social backgrounds

• "In strategies for improving participation in adult learning, it would look well beyond the current preoccupation with basic skills and NVQ level 2"

From Frank Coffield (editor) "Taking

> "We are often accused of being leisure centres for the young undergraduate"

lifelong learning seriously: An alternative vision", forthcoming, Institute of Education, London

We are often accused of being leisure centres for the young undergraduate in the student movement. With the quantities of the young set to demographically dip, age discrimination legislation on goods and services on its way and an ever increasingly mature cohort in membership, I can't think of a better time for all of us- me especially included- to think again about what and who we think learning is for and to adjust our organisations accordingly.

What that's not about is wondering why mature postgraduates don't join the rugby club or moving union council to another time so that student parents can attend. It is about reshaping our organisations and our obsessions with skills acquisition, youth development and academia into something more rational and progressive.

Contributing to AGENDA

'Where would Agenda be without the diverse and challenging contributions of members?'

Recent developments in Agenda have received excellent feedback, and numerous contributors can take the credit for the success of the journal.

Agenda can only be as good as the articles it runs, and we would urge any reader with an idea to put pen to paper....

Perhaps you've just completed a new project and could offer some tips to others.

Maybe you feel strongly about one of our articles – whether you love it or hate it , tell us!

Perhaps you know something we don't – a useful web site for example.

Or perhaps you can spin a good yarn about a particular tricky moment in your union....

Whatever your ideas, Agenda is your forum.

For those of you who do want to put pen to paper, the following guidelines will help you structure your ideas....

Reports or Feature?

Reports will be largely factual and will give readers a general overview of the subject matter.

Reports should be a maximum of 700 words.

Features will be analytical pieces which give in depth consideration to the subject matter, and will be a maximum of 2000 words.

Adding Interest or Credibility

There are lots of techniques to help you add weight to your article:

• Statistics

How many people are affected by your topic? How have things changed over the last x years?

For statistical information, try relevant web sites, legal briefing documents, the AMSU Finance survey or the general media

• Quotes

Everyone likes to read what other people have to say and quotes add personality to articles. Quotes may be from colleagues, external figures or other publications or you may open with a particularly outrageous quote to argue against.

• Theories or Models

Does your situation or argument support a particular model? Or, even better, does your piece challenge a well respected model?

• Case Studies

Has this happened somewhere else? Was the outcome similar or totally different?

• Recommended Further Reading

Where can readers go to get more information?

• How will you add visual interest?

The Agenda design team do their best to supply graphics, but this is not always possible. The visual appeal of your article will affect how many people read it, and all contributors should make every effort to include at least one of the following :

• Your union logo
• A passport photograph of the group or activity you are writing about
• A diagram or graph
• A cartoon
• Copies of any promotional material that can be scanned

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Before you submit your article, please:

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• The issue you would like to see covered
• The 'slant' of the article
• People who would be willing to be interviewed, or people who are particularly knowledgeable on this topic
• A brief case study

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