

Executive Summary

Surfing the Wave:

A Strategic Response to A Wave of Change: The Future Landscape of the Student Movement



national union of students

Executive Summary

We have summarised what we feel are the key themes and recommendations in the document. This is a strategic summary and the remainder of Surfing the Wave is a more detailed explanation of how we might implement such a strategy.

The importance of the student voice

Student representation is vital

To ensure the future legitimacy of the student movement we need to be relevant to more than 10–35% of the student population and this will require a step change in approach. It means supporting students' unions to ensure student representation survives and thrives, leading to tangible improvements in the student experience in the eyes of students. It means students' unions focusing on educational outcomes not processes, creating responsive courses and teachers, driving up student satisfaction, raising retention levels and helping students through adversity.

Students' unions must become Standards Champions

Regardless of the level to which students pay for their education (if at all) and the methodology for making such a contribution, students have the right to wider and better information about their university and programme of study, as well as guarantees about minimum standards and entitlements on key features of their educational experience. We should be relentless in our pursuit of securing educational change for students.

Our representative work must be Evidence-led

We should become experts on all students' lives. Putting learners in charge of the commissioning, interpretation and promotion of research about the student experience is the most powerful combination possible if we are to promote, defend and extend students' rights.

A hyper-diversity within the student body, the education sector and students' unions

Focus on Educational Discrimination

All students care about the quality of their educational experience but different student groups face different challenges depending on their circumstances. There is a need to focus on the educational discrimination that each of these groups face, recognising that institutions must change to meet the needs of all their students and for students' unions to work to achieve these changes, because that is what powerful educational representative bodies are for.

Outstanding Research and Data

If we are to effectively respond to the issue of hyper-diversity we need outstanding data both nationally and locally to understand the life journey and needs of all students. We need to understand that a service or approach undertaken by a students' union might open up opportunities for one part of the student body, but also could simultaneously create barriers for other types of students.

Changes in students' union funding sources

Preserving existing income streams

The principal source of income for most students' unions is block grants and these are under serious threat as a result of major cuts in public expenditure. A series of recommendations are made to secure block grant income. Pricing changes are proposed for NUS Extra with a recession fund created at a national level to support students' unions affected by block grant cuts.

New Income Streams

Successful students' unions in the future will be able to expand in to growth areas and work collaboratively to increase their income streams. We particularly think there will be growth in media sales, accommodation and jobs, alumni/ graduates, corporate fundraising, energy suppliers and online purchasing.

Reducing Expenditure

Many students' unions have undertaken, or will need to undertake, severe reductions in expenditure and practical support may be needed on areas such as closing services. Students' unions are also exploring shared service provision where it is believed that this might provide cost efficiencies and improved service delivery (where cost savings are not achieved but where students see better outcomes). The 'pensions crisis' also needs serious consideration by every students' union with clear strategic responses developed.

Students' Unions in Crisis

A failing students' union lets down its student body, its institution and the wider student movement. The current way in which we respond to students' union organisational failure at a national level is ad hoc and inappropriate. We propose to deliver a coordinated approach to support students' unions at 'crisis' point.

Ensuring Quality Students' Union Management and Governance

We believe that the Students' Union Evaluation Initiative (SUEI) should be the vehicle for defining, assessing and enhancing quality in students' unions. Our aim would be to develop SUEI, so that as well as the current two-year SUEI programme aimed at the largest students' unions, there is also a SUEI process for small and specialist and large FE students' unions. It is proposed that SUEI is split in to an accrediting arm and developmental arm. Recommendations are made on governance, supporting external trustees and developing trustee boards.

Demonstrating the Social and Economic Impact of Students' Unions

Students' unions must demonstrate their social and economic impact to students, if they are to ensure their relevance and legitimacy, and to institutions, if they are to protect their funding levels over the forthcoming period. A set of proposals articulate how we might achieve this.

Changing student lifestyle and participation

Need to enhance employability

There is an overwhelming focus on employability across Government and within all educational institutions. You said you particularly wanted us to focus on the link between student activities and employability, supporting work that promotes student enterprise initiatives. We should ensure internships offered by employers are kitemarked to guarantee they are of a suitable quality.

Developing Student Activities

Student activities probably involve more students than any other aspect of a students' union and national support to such activities has been lacking. During our consultation you said more national support should be given to enhance student activities and proposals are made to accelerate this work.

Learner-centred Physical Space

A plethora of new learning environments have emerged on campuses over the past ten years. We should catalyse innovative approaches to students union physical and social space.

Student Debt

Debt is now a permanent feature of student life and we make recommendations for increasing financial literacy amongst students and challenging universities who restrict progression or graduation where there is outstanding accommodation debt.

Democratic Participation

We should raise the bar on democratic participation as an average turnout of 14% across HE students' unions is unacceptably low, undermining perceptions of our legitimacy as representative organisations. Interventions should occur where there are exceptionally low election turnouts.

The rise of digital media

If all students' unions used the same systems integrated at the national level then the benefits to the student movement as a whole would be huge. A shared platform, integrated nationally, with effective support and guidance, will allow students' unions to collaborate with content, knowledge and best practice, increasing participation and benefiting fully from new income opportunities.

Membership Extranet

A new interactive Membership Extranet will be launched in Summer 2010 merging officeronline, nussl.co.uk and amsu.net allowing good practice to be shared between SU officers and staff.

A Students' Union Web Offer and E-tools

An NUS-endorsed web offer for students' unions and package of e-tools (including e-voting packages and apps) should be developed to assist students' unions to help increase participation and engagement, making communication with members easier. Our potential to raise revenue and improve retail, sponsorship and ticketing performance would all be vastly improved through a single system.

Towards Seven Million Voices through a National Database

The Student Movement has over seven million individuals in membership and its potential as a force for positive change is immense. Critical to our ability to utilise this potential is our ability to be able to contact all students at the touch of a button. In the accompanying document *How the National Organisations will Deliver Surfing the Wave* proposals are outlined to accelerate the build of students' union databases that will create a campaigning force of seven million voices.