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CS 5: National Union of Students (NUS) engagement with internationalisation.

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Introduction.

This case study was produced in response to a realisation, indeed a surprise, that in most of the literature which had been consulted during the period of developing this project there had been surprisingly few references to any role for student unions in the internationalisation of higher education. There had been a brief mention of involvement of student unions in relation to fundraising in the Leicester-Gondar medical link case study (CS 4); and a passing reference – when researching ‘Chapter Four: The European Agenda’ – to students in mainland Europe being organised to protest against the Bologna process, but very little else.

Key learning up front

- **CS 5.1.** It is recommended that staff instigating any form of collaboration involving student mobility should consider how they can include student union representation throughout their planning and implementation; there should also be close liaison with and support for students’ unions and student societies which support integration.
- **CS 5.2.** It is suggested that the UKCISA website should be the first port-of-call for anyone seeking pastoral advice concerning international students.
- **CS 5.3.** It is suggested that institutions should consciously work with their students’ union in order to bring about institutional internationalisation.
- **CS 5.4.** It is essential for students’ unions to endeavour to make a positive impact both on the experience of international students in the UK, and the internationalisation of students in general.
- **CS 5.5.** It is essential for students’ unions to ensure the participation of international students in political activities, such as standing for office or voting in union elections.
- **CS 5.6.** It is essential for students’ unions to arrange social environments which are not intimidating to some of their members.

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- **CS 5.7.** It is essential for students' unions to carry out research to discover what the perspectives of their students are, in order to develop a suitable range of services and structures.
- **CS 5.8.** It is necessary for institutions and students' unions to look critically at student satisfaction reports, to see what still needs to be done rather than to be complacent about what has been achieved.
- **CS 5.9.** It is essential for students' unions to provide training in matters of diversity for sabbaticals and representatives.
- **CS 5.10.** It is essential for students' unions to have a (possibly sabbatical) International Secretary post, and an International Student Committee.
- **CS 5.11.** It is essential for students' unions to be included in steps and activities which focus on internationalisation-at-home.
- **CS 5.12.** It is essential for students' unions to explore how to encourage their institution to become a truly 'Global university'.
- **CS 5.13.** It is essential for students' unions to increase the opportunities for home and international students to engage with each other.
- **CS 5.14.** It is essential for institutions to work with students' unions to address the target at least 20 per cent of those graduating to have a study or training period abroad.
- **CS 5.15.** It is suggested that any envisaged schemes which might include outward mobility of students should look at the suggested institutional questions concerning student mobility given later in this case study.

Internationalising Students' Unions

Even in 'Internationalising Higher Education' (Jones and Brown 2007), which is the most comprehensive collection of writings concerning 'current thinking about internationalisation and academic pedagogy in Higher Education ... how developing good practice for international students is good practice for all students' (a description in the foreword of the book), there are surprisingly only a few mentions of any role for students' unions. David Killick's chapter in that book, 'Internationalisation and engagement with the wider community' includes students' unions in the context of community engagement projects, giving a Language Buddies scheme run by the students' union at Nottingham, and a Community Action scheme run by the students' union at Leeds Metropolitan as examples; and there is also a passing mention of students' unions in Maria Kelo's chapter: 'Approaches to services for international students,' as one of the university bodies which may be involved in support service provision. Finally there is a plea in Jones and Brown's own final contextualising chapter, in a section concerning internationalisation-at-home, recommending: 'there should also be close liaison with and support for students' unions and student societies which support integration.' Given that much of the discourse around the topic

focuses on enlisting support from a wide variety of stakeholders within universities this apparent absence became a topic to explore.

The largest exception to this absence is in various publications of UKCISA, an organisation which defines its purpose as:

To promote and facilitate international student mobility, to and from the UK, to help students (and others involved in international education) develop a global perspective and to contribute to human development, political stability, economic prosperity and greater intercultural understanding¹.

The UKCISA website should be the first port-of-call for anyone seeking pastoral advice concerning international students. To give an example of their inclusion of students' unions, each chapter of the publication 'Managing accommodation for international students: a handbook for practitioners'² published in 2010, concludes with a panel of suggestions headed 'Points for consideration for institutions, working with their students' union:' As an illustration of this, the chapter concerning pre-departure information concludes with:

Points for consideration for institutions, working with their students' union:

- make sure that pre-arrival information is transparent, full and up front;
- provide pre-arrival information in a range of media, maximising the use of evolving technologies in which students prefer to access information;
- provide for the growing expectation that students will be able to communicate and share information and views with existing students and recent alumni through social networking facilities;
- keep in touch with recruitment agents and keep them up to date.

This case study therefore aims to review what is being done by the National Union of Students, and by the students' unions of various universities, to enhance internationalisation.

More than ten years ago UKCOSA (as the organisation was then named) published a guide to internationalising students' unions in a 'Good Practice Series'. That guide was in part a case study of the University of Sheffield students' union (Holliday 1998)³. Some years later, in 2009, the NUS with funding from the Prime Minister's Initiative (PMI) channelled to them by UKCISA (the newer name), published 'Internationalising students' unions in higher education', which suggested a strategic framework and a self-audit toolkit 'about the NUS working together with students' unions to make a positive impact on

¹ <http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/about/index.php>

² http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/pdf/about/material_media/accommodation_guide.pdf

³ http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/files/pdf/about/material_media/internationalising_students_unions.pdf

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the experience of international students in the UK, and students in general' (p1). The two publications, with a very similar remit but a decade apart, can be examined to note changes in the perception of what internationalisation entails, and how the role of students' unions has evolved.

The 1998 guide was compiled by Jo Halliday of the University of Sheffield, which then had, and indeed now has, a students' union which in many ways can be taken as a model for internationalisation. The general role of unions which it described was to be representative of students' interests, and to be a provider of services and activities. The most notable feature of this guide, viewed from the perspective of 2011, is the lack of any mention of aspects which feature in the current understanding of internationalisation-at-home. The guide described a time of great flux in the overall profile of students resulting from the 'massification of higher education', within which the increased internationalisation was but one aspect, this being a time of wider changes, including the increased presence of students from non-traditional groups such as mature students.

The prime concerns at that time relate to international students' comparative lack of engagement with different activities of the unions. One issue identified is a failure to obtain the participation of many international students with political activities, such as standing for office or voting in union elections, as many were unfamiliar with students' unions as they operate in the UK. One comment concerning reasons for this lack of participation was: 'perhaps because they do not see many of the issues as being of great relevance to them'. Concerning social activities: 'their perception is one of an alcohol obsessed environment and many feel nervous of the rowdy atmosphere'. The task spelled out in the guide was firstly to carry out research within any institution to discover what were the perspectives of their students, thereafter 'to consider how to develop a range of services and structures to encourage all international students to become involved with the organisation'.

The steps which were recommended therefore focussed on how to encourage engagement, and this included providing training in matters of diversity for 'home student sabbaticals and elected representatives'. The motivation for such training was described in strictly functional terms, to enable the representatives to mobilise increased participation from a growingly diverse membership, so again, viewed from the present day, what is interesting is the absence of any suggestion of benefits *per se* from their developing of global perspectives (the internationalisation-at-home agenda). Another recommended step concerned changes in organisational structure, describing the process at Sheffield of establishing a large number of elected representatives and a diversification of

committees to respond to changes in the make-up of the student body. Again such moves would depend on accurately researching the profile of students within the institution. Specifically concerning international students, a sabbatical International Secretary post had been created in order to ensure a voice for international students, so Sheffield became one of only two universities with such posts in UK universities at that time. Sheffield also reserved places for international representation on all other committees, to allow international students to participate in all areas of decision making, not only issues directly related to them. Similar steps, including the creation of an International Student Committee to be responsible for welcoming new students, for arranging social activities, language support, and trips, were recommended for other institutions.

Concerning social mixing of home and international students, the report stated that:

In many institutions home and international students do not often socialise together. This may be due to cultural factors that set up barriers to participation. For example, an alcohol-based entertainment culture in the union may exclude students who wish to avoid alcohol.

As a result the union in Sheffield had developed other facilities to cater for different needs and tastes. In addition the International Student Committee had reserved places for home students as a further attempt to encourage mixing.

The report then itemised necessary steps to be taken in order to carry out an audit to enable 'an organisation to be aware of the barriers preventing international students from participating in specific services and activities; to identify the gaps in service provision; and to identify positive steps and financial implications'.

The 1998 guide, therefore, was restricted solely to the role of unions in relation to their international student members, which can be thought of as the old agenda, in particular concerning representation and service provision, in order to ensure their participation and engagement with the institutions, with no mention of internationalising home students or indeed of internationalising the institution generally.

In contrast, the 2009 report 'Internationalising students' unions in higher education', which is an output of the 'Internationalising Students' Unions project' funded through the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education (PMI), encourages students unions to be involved in two distinct areas of activity. Firstly, for inwardly mobile international students, there is a continuation of the type of work described above. The report presents a balanced view of how successful universities have been up to now in ensuring participation. The

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International Students Barometer⁴ reports largely positive satisfaction with students' unions amongst international students, but other research carried out by the University of Warwick students' union and the University of Sheffield, cited on page 15 of the report, show that (particularly concerning Chinese students in the Warwick research) there still a long way to go in removing perceived barriers to participation, both concerning accessing social events and participating in democratic functions. The second area of activity, something absent in the earlier report, concerns steps and activities which focus on internationalisation-at-home, what can be thought of as the new agenda. These two strands can be described separately, but they become combined in the concept of a truly 'Global university' which will be introduced later.

Concerning incoming international students, the recommended activities largely match those of the report in 1998, that is ensuring the creation of 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' (NUS 2009 p1). This, however, has a balancing commitment to internationalising the experiences of all students 'by increasing the opportunities for home and international students to engage with each other'.

The project started by eliciting experiences from a project group representing several universities, and as with the 1998 report it also developed an audit tool 'with the aim of helping each union to evaluate its current provision for international students and to identify areas for future development' (p23).

Current challenges for international students which were identified included difficulties in opening bank accounts, accommodation, safety, finding a welcoming atmosphere, making friends with home students, immigration issues, and integration with host community (p13). Challenges for the students' unions, listed on page 16, concerned:

- How to have a positive impact on the international student experience.
- Celebrating the differences and individuality of each culture without forcing integration.
- Remaining sympathetic to all cultures.
- Responding to different students perceptions of the students' unions.
- Clarifying the experiences of international students.
- Establishing genuine, two-way communications with international student members.

⁴ http://www.i-graduate.org/services/student_insight--student_barometer.html

- How to increase international students' participation in democratic processes.
- Ensuring elected officers and staff have the skills to work sensitively in this area.
- Facilitating home/ international student interaction.
- Responding to key issues, e.g. concerns about accommodation, immigration, finances and employment, teaching and learning.
- Developing appropriate partnerships to work on internationalising the student experience.

Concerning the internationalisation-at-home agenda the report discusses the need for international strategies which cover all aspects of university life, including 'internationalising the student experience of all students' (p17). This international aspect is connected to issues of diversity and equality.

Furthermore, home students have much to gain from internationalising their own experience and integrating with their international peers. UK graduates are being warned that unless they are able to compete in a globalised economy, they face huge difficulties in gaining employment in their chosen fields (p17).

Although this can be seen as a step forward from the situation in the previous decade, it is still rather disappointing that the motivation for engagement of home students with the internationalisation process is described in such functional, extrinsic, terms, rather than as something which results from curiosity and genuine desires to broaden horizons.

Since the initial development of the audit tool presented in this report two cohorts, each of 20 university students' unions, have been enlisted to use and develop the materials, in 2010⁵ and 2011⁶, with the intention of identifying areas for future improvement.

Students' Unions and Erasmus

A welcome initiative in 2010 was the publication of 'Students studying abroad and the European Higher Education Agenda', published by the NUS as a prompt for students' unions to get involved in encouraging home students to become more mobile, including suggestions of what the unions' could do, both directly with students as well as how they could push for institutional changes. The report refers to the European target for mobility: 'In 2020, at least 20 per cent of those graduating in the European Higher Education Area should have had a study or training period abroad.' This is taken from point 18 in a communiqué

⁵ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/news/article/international/82/>

⁶ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/news/article/33768/1204/>

issued by a European-level ministerial conference in 2009 at Leuven⁷. Elsewhere in this project report – in ‘Chapter Four: The European Agenda’ – there is a discussion of European declarations which are extremely aspirational but which do not address the practical issues concerning implementation of plans; this target, disassociated from any enabling funds, seems to be an example of this.

The NUS report examines current trends, reporting a large imbalance for UK universities between incoming and outgoing numbers of students under the Erasmus scheme; the positive outcomes of mobility; and describes the rather limited demographic profile of those students who are mobile – this is explored in more depth in ‘Chapter Four: The European Agenda’. The NUS therefore sets itself the task of trying to encourage increased UK student mobility; which gives it the same dilemma of many of the newer universities who are trying to encourage mobility whilst at the same time encouraging widening participation in higher education, which is deliberately targeting intakes from those demographic groups who are less likely to become internationally mobile⁸. The specific areas of work suggested for students’ unions are twofold: firstly to apply persuasion at an institutional level via a list of question to ask institutions, and secondly to encourage students to consider study abroad.

These are the questions which the NUS suggests unions ask of their institutions⁹:

1. Is the period of studying embedded within the course and is the period of study recognised? Do they get a differently named qualification to emphasise any additional time/effort? Are study abroad periods recognised on the student’s academic transcript?
2. How are credits incorporated into a student’s qualification – if they pass their study abroad period and are awarded credit points (ECTS) for this, and how does this translate into grading such as a first, 2:1, 2:2 etc?
3. What support does your institution provide for students studying abroad? Do they have a named contact within their home institution? How are students studying abroad supported in the administrative details, such as select course options for the following year or finding accommodation?
4. How does your institution promote Erasmus? What efforts does the institution make to illustrate to students what the benefits of a year

⁷ http://www.ond.vlaanderen.be/hogeronderwijs/bologna/conference/documents/Leuven_Louvain-la-Neuve_Communique%C3%A9_April_2009.pdf

⁸ <http://www.nus.org.uk/en/News/News/Widening-participation-in-higher-education/>

⁹ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/news/6010/eubriefina.pdf>

abroad can be and to fight common misconceptions about negative aspects of studying/working abroad?

5. Does your institution publicise study abroad opportunities as part of open days and outreach activities?
6. Is encouraging home student mobility incorporated into the institutional international strategy?
7. Does the institution provide free language courses for those going on study abroad? If yes, could this be broadened out to all students?
8. Does the institution organise promotional events for students at the institution, such as Erasmus fairs? Is there funding available from your institution for the students' union to run these type of events?
9. Is there an Erasmus/study abroad point of contact in all departments? How are they publicised?
10. Does the institution highlight the differences there may be in studying in different countries?

The overall intention of this report seems to be to dispel fears concerning achieving credits, finance, and language, with information collected into information sheets for students. The main emphasis, unsurprising considering the way that students' unions operate, is via the creation of Erasmus societies, and it gives several case studies of these.

NUS Charter for becoming a Global university (2010)

The two thrusts of NUS activity, that is to say the older agenda of care of and services for inwardly mobile students, and the newer agenda of encouraging a wider institutional internationalisation via encouraging the mixing of home and international students, pressing for internationalisation of the curriculum, and encouraging outward mobility, can be seen to come together in the concept of 'becoming a global university'¹⁰. The NUS has produced a charter which outlines ten key principles that the NUS International Students' Campaign believe are key to becoming a truly global university.

The ten principles the charter states are:

1. Every university should have an international strategy

¹⁰ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/asset/news/6006/NUS-Charter-Global-University.pdf>

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2. Students' unions should engage students to develop a global university
3. Institutions should provide accurate and accessible information when recruiting international students
4. Universities should have a transparent process for recognising qualifications and credit obtained in other countries
5. Universities should have a well-planned induction and academic transition for international students
6. Institutions should consider income from fees as a by-product, not an aim
7. Universities should support international students effectively
8. Institutions should be fully integrated in the Bologna Process
9. A global university will have a truly mobile student population
10. Institutions should have an internationally-focussed team of staff

Ongoing activities

The NUS produce monthly Global Future Bulletins¹¹ to supply resources concerning international students and home students' global experiences. The issue in October 2010 focussed on 'institutional international strategies', and the one in February 2011 focussed on the Immigration campaign relating to proposed changes in UK Border Agency Tier 4 policy. The NUS submission to the UK Border Agency concerning proposed amendments to students' visas was a well researched and well argued case. In addition, from February 2011 a series of resources concerning internationalisation of universities and students unions is promised¹², these will include resources connected to the seven strategic aims of the Internationalising Students' Unions project: Democracy, Representation, Community, Membership Services, Communications, Officer and Staff Development, Partnerships and Collaboration.

References

Jones, E., & Brown, S. (2007) *Internationalising Higher Education*. London and New York: Routledge.

¹¹ <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/campaigns/international/global-future-bulletins/>

¹² <http://www.nusconnect.org.uk/news/article/33768/1347/>

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