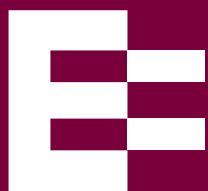
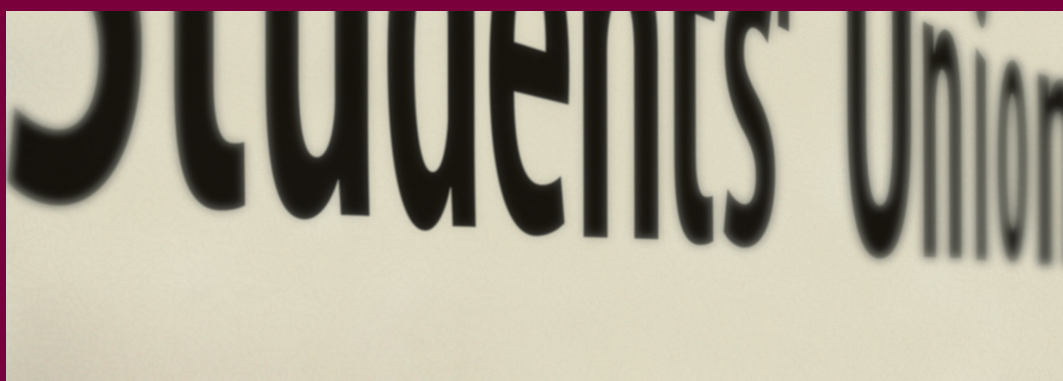


Inclusive Students' Unions

Survey Findings 2007

Executive Summary



Equality Challenge Unit



national union of students



Executive summary

Equality Challenge Unit (ECU) has worked in conjunction with the Association for Managers in Students' Unions (AMSU) and the National Union of Students (NUS) on this project. The project arose from the realisation that while higher education institutions (HEIs) have been required to work transparently to meet various legislative demands in relation to equality, including relatively new agendas of proactive work on race, disability and gender equality, there has been a lack of clarity about the equality legislation as it applies to students' unions.

The Inclusive Students' Unions project set out to find answers to research questions under the following broad headings:

- = democracy and representation: do students from all backgrounds feel equally able to take on representative roles within unions' democratic structures?
- = Union staff: do union staff reach out proactively to different groups of students to ensure that all students take part in union life?
- = Union services: are union services and facilities equally accessible to and used by students from all backgrounds?

ECU surveyed both students and union staff in England, Wales and Northern Ireland over a two-week period in June/July 2007. This document sets out the findings of this research.

The headline findings are as follows.

1 Democracy and representation

- = Election processes may not have been designed to include or attract postgraduate or part-time students, disabled students and students who are parents and carers, as well as students of different ages and minority ethnic groups. This means that student leaders generally do not mirror the full diversity of their student body.

- = Election processes may also discriminate indirectly against women, who are more likely to be mature and part-time students, and are more likely to have parenting and/or caring responsibilities.
- = We found that 31% of students (30) would consider standing for a full-time officer post, whereas 48% (47) would consider standing for a part-time officer post. Female students, students who hold a religious belief, and students in the 18–21 age group and those in their 40s and 50s were significantly more attracted than others to part-time elected officer positions.
- = In terms of attitudes to elected officers, the results of this survey highlight low levels of awareness or knowledge about the roles, job descriptions and activities of these officers.
- = Twenty-nine per cent of students (26) disagreed or strongly disagreed that elected officers are accessible and approachable, and felt that they did not understand the roles of elected officers. The same number of student respondents felt that elected officers did not adequately represent their concerns about student life. Comments made by respondents to these questions indicate that more emphasis needs to be placed on communication generally between unions and students, and specifically between elected officers and students.

2 Union staff

- = Twenty-five per cent of staff (33) reported that they do not believe students' union staff to be a diverse group of people. However, it is clear from the comments received that there is a lack of clarity about who the permanent staff should reflect – the student body, or the community from which they are drawn.
- = A significant number of staff (20%, 27) did not feel that students' union staff are well trained about equality issues. Generally, the comments made by staff indicated an ever-increasing awareness of equality and diversity issues, but that this was not matched with training opportunities for all staff.

3 Union services

Communications

- = A sizeable number of student respondents selected 'don't know' in regard to communications. It is significant that 12% (10) could not comment about unions' websites, and 27% (20) about newsletters. It was not possible to determine if these students did not use the service, or if they did not have a view on its accessibility.
- = Comments from both staff and students show that students' unions have experienced difficulty communicating with some hard-to-reach groups. They suggest that this is as much about communicating the relevance of the students' union to these students' lives as it is about informing them of the services the students' union provides.
- = In terms of the opportunity to communicate upwards and influence services, considerable numbers of students responded 'don't know' (20%, 16) or 'disagree' (17%, 14).

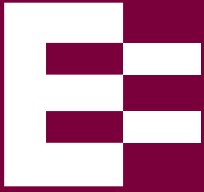
Services

- = What is remarkable about the findings reported here is the number of students who chose the 'don't know' option. This is surprising as the survey was disseminated through the NUS website and actively distributed by NUS through the email databases of its four liberation campaigns (for women, Black students, disabled students, and lesbian, gay, bisexual and trans students), suggesting that respondents were students who were in some way engaged with students' unions.
- = Only 50% of students (39) found general social spaces to be welcoming and inclusive. Similarly, only 53% of both staff and students reported union entertainments to be inclusive.
- = The lack of childcare facilities was identified as hindering the development of a more diverse workforce and the provision of more inclusive services.

- = The comments on freshers' weeks reveal that a great deal of work has taken place to make these more inclusive. However, the data show that many staff (22%, 28) and students (24%, 20) did not believe sufficient efforts were made to include all students in freshers' week. Comments also suggested that one difficulty was that students were initially bombarded with information, but little attempt was made to communicate with them throughout the rest of the year.
- = Comments by both staff and students suggest that clubs and societies are perceived to be the jewel in the crown of students' unions. However, surprisingly a number of students responded that they did not know if these were welcoming and accessible (15%, 13) and a further 14% students (12) reported that clubs and societies were unwelcoming and not accessible. The barriers to clubs and societies were cited as:
 - clubs and societies perceived to be cliquey or elitist
 - drinking culture and initiation ceremonies
 - not enough done to encourage mature and postgraduate students to participate.

4 Next steps

The next stage of the project involves gathering more in-depth case studies from survey respondents about inclusive practice in their own unions. To assist with this, an in-depth focus event with some survey respondents took place in October 2007 to establish and explore priority areas for further developing inclusive practice in students' unions. Full guidance for students' unions will be published in Spring 2008, facilitating sharing of practice through case studies, and making recommendations based on the outcome of focus groups and other interviews. The guidance will be relevant to staff and students working at all levels within students' unions, from general managers and service managers to elected officers and leaders of clubs and societies.



Equality Challenge Unit

7th floor, Queens House
55/56 Lincoln's Inn Fields
London WC2A 3LJ

T +44 (0)20 7438 1010 F +44 (0)20 7438 1011

E pubs@ecu.ac.uk www.ecu.ac.uk

© Equality Challenge Unit. ECU's publications are produced free of charge to the HE sector. Information can be reproduced accurately as long as the source is clearly identified. Alternative formats are available.