

A photograph of three students working together at a desk. On the left, a man with a beard and glasses is looking at a laptop screen while holding a pen. On the right, a woman is smiling and looking at the same screen. In the foreground, another person's hands are visible, also working on a laptop. The image has a pinkish-purple tint.

Crisis Communications Toolkit

Who is this toolkit for?

This toolkit has been developed by NUS Charity, with funding support from Medr, to support higher education students' unions in Wales. It is intended for elected officers, staff and trustees who may need to respond to challenging situations, providing practical guidance to help students' unions navigate crises with confidence, protect students' interests, and fulfil their governance responsibilities.

Welcome

Students' unions exist to represent, support and enrich the lives of students. And most of the time, this work happens without significant controversy or disruption. However, every students' union will eventually face situations that test its leadership, judgement and communications.

- A safeguarding concern.
- A controversial speaker.
- A student encampment.
- A major university announcement.
- A social media storm.
- A serious incident involving students.

When these situations arise, the quality of the union's response can have a significant impact on students, staff, trustees and wider stakeholders.

This toolkit has been developed to help students' unions navigate difficult situations with confidence.

It is not intended to turn officers, staff or trustees into communications specialists. Instead, it aims to provide practical advice, tools and examples that can help students' unions respond effectively when things become difficult.

Why read this?

Few students' unions have dedicated crisis communications expertise. Many officers are taking on their first significant leadership role. And staff and trustees may not have much experience in this area.

When a crisis occurs, there is rarely time to start learning from scratch.

This guide is designed to help students' unions:

- Recognise when an issue may be becoming a crisis.
- Respond quickly and effectively.
- Communicate with confidence during uncertainty.
- Understand the role of trustees and governance.
- Support students during difficult situations.
- Learn from experience and strengthen future preparedness.

You do not need to become an expert in crisis communications.

A note before we start

Many people assume crisis communications is about having all the answers, making perfect decisions, or finding exactly the right words.

It isn't.

During a crisis, people rarely expect you to have all the answers immediately. They do expect you to take the issue seriously, communicate honestly, and demonstrate that appropriate action is being taken.

Perfection is not the goal. The goal is to respond in a way that protects trust, supports students, and avoids making a difficult situation worse.

What is a crisis?

The word "crisis" is often used to describe any difficult situation. In practice, not every problem is a crisis. Students' unions deal with challenges every day.

- Complaints
- Disagreements
- Operational issues
- Negative feedback

The vast majority can be managed through normal processes and decision-making arrangements. A crisis is different.

A crisis is a situation that poses a significant threat to an organisation's people, reputation, operations, finances or ability to fulfil its purpose.

They may involve a combination of the following:

- Reputational risk
- High levels of concern from stakeholders
- Potential harm or disruption
- Significant media attention
- Pressure to act quickly

Examples might include:

- Serious safeguarding concerns
- Significant media attention
- Major data breaches
- Allegations involving officers, staff, or trustees
- Serious incidents at events
- Major university announcements

Some develop quickly. Others emerge gradually over days, weeks or even months.

The important point is recognising when an issue is moving beyond routine business and requires a more coordinated response.

A crisis can affect far more than an organisation's reputation. Depending on the nature of the issue, it can have significant consequences for students, staff, trustees and the organisation itself.

Potential impacts include:

- Loss of trust and confidence from students, staff, partners and stakeholders
- Damage to relationships with the university
- Increased scrutiny from regulators, funders or external bodies
- Loss of influence and credibility
- Difficulty securing future funding, sponsorship or commercial income
- Pressure on existing funding or revenue streams
- Reduced engagement with services, activities or campaigns
- Lower staff morale and wellbeing
- Increased staff turnover or volunteer disengagement
- Significant management time diverted away from core priorities
- Legal, financial or regulatory consequences
- Reputational damage that can persist long after the original issue has been resolved

In extreme circumstances, a poorly managed crisis can threaten an organisation's long-term sustainability or ability to fulfil its purpose.

For students' unions, there can be additional consequences. Students may lose confidence that the union can effectively represent them. Universities may become more cautious in their engagement with the union. Trustees may need to become more directly involved in oversight and governance. Relationships that have taken years to build can be damaged surprisingly quickly.

It is important to remember that these outcomes are not inevitable. Many organisations experience crises and recover successfully. In fact, some emerge stronger, having demonstrated transparency, accountability and effective leadership under pressure.

For students' unions, there can be additional consequences. Students may lose confidence that the union can effectively represent them. Universities may become more cautious in their engagement with the union. Trustees may need to become more directly involved in oversight and governance. Relationships that have taken years to build can be damaged surprisingly quickly.

It is important to remember that these outcomes are not inevitable. Many organisations experience crises and recover successfully. In fact, some emerge stronger, having demonstrated transparency, accountability and effective leadership under pressure.

The purpose of crisis management is not to avoid every difficulty. It is to minimise harm, protect trust, and ensure that a difficult situation does not become significantly worse through poor decision-making or communication.

It doesn't have to be your fault to be your crisis

One of the most important lessons in crisis communications is this: It doesn't have to be your fault, to be your crisis.

Students' unions are often required to respond to situations that they did not create and cannot directly control. This might be about a decision the university has taken, wider geo-politics, or a student society acting unilaterally.

Regardless of fault, it might well be the case that students, staff, the local community, national press, stakeholders will look to you for a response, action, or explanation.

How a crisis might emerge

Most crises do not begin with a front-page headline. They often start with something that appears quite ordinary.

- An email.
- A complaint.
- A social media post.
- A conversation.
- A journalist asking a question.
- A safeguarding concern.

Recognising these early warning signs can help students' unions respond more effectively.

One of the most common mistakes organisations make is assuming that a crisis will announce itself clearly. In reality, many crises are only obvious in hindsight.

Internal issues

Some crises originate within the organisation itself. Examples might include:

- Allegations involving officers or staff.
- Governance concerns
- Financial irregularities
- Safeguarding issues
- Data breaches
- Significant operational failures

Not every issue in these areas will become a crisis. However, all have the potential to develop into one if they are not recognised and addressed appropriately.

Student-led issues

Students' unions exist to support student activity. Occasionally, issues involving societies, sports clubs, volunteers or student representatives can attract wider attention. Examples might include:

- Behaviour at an event
- Discrimination complaints
- Freedom of speech disputes
- Conduct issues involving society members
- Social media activity
- Student campaigns and protests

Many of these situations begin as local issues but can quickly attract wider interest.

Institutional pressures

Students' unions are closely connected to their universities. As a result, decisions made by the institution can quickly become issues for the students' union. Examples might include:

- Course closures
- Departmental restructures
- Industrial action
- Campus closures
- University financial difficulties
- Significant changes to services or provision

Students will often look to their students' union for information, representation and reassurance, regardless of who made the original decision.

External events

Some crises originate outside the organisation. Examples might include:

- National policy changes
- International events
- Public health incidents
- Severe weather
- Major incidents affecting the local community
- Issues affecting the wider higher education sector

Crisis fishing

Sometimes a crisis begins because somebody is actively looking for a story. For example:

- A local journalist on a slow news day
- A national newspaper seeking comment on a national issue
- A campaign group drawing attention to an issue
- A political organisation seeking publicity
- Social media accounts amplifying a local situation

Students' unions should be aware that some organisations and commentators hold strong views about universities, students' unions, freedom of speech, equality issues and student activism.

This does not mean avoiding difficult decisions. However, it does mean recognising that some issues may attract attention well beyond the campus community and may be interpreted very differently by external audiences.



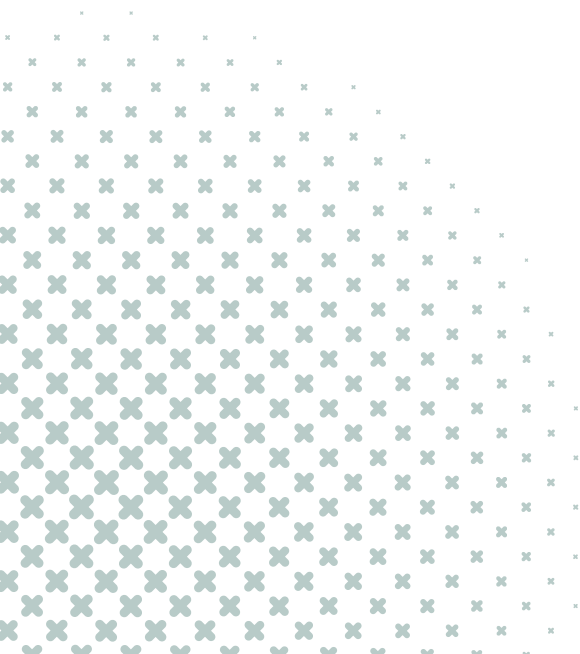
Examples of poorly managed crisis situations

It is often the case that the original issue is not always what causes the greatest damage. In some cases, it is the response that turns a serious problem into a major crisis.

It is often the case that the original issue is not what causes the greatest damage. In some cases, it is the response that turns a serious problem into a major crisis.

- For example, Oxfam's safeguarding failures in Haiti were made worse when Chief Executive Mark Goldring suggested that criticism was disproportionate because the charity had not "murdered babies in their cots". The comments attracted widespread criticism and became part of the story. Oxfam subsequently lost significant funding, and Goldring later announced that he would stand down. [The House of Commons International Development Committee questioned Goldring about the comments as part of its inquiry into sexual exploitation and abuse in the aid sector.](#)

- Similarly, Volkswagen's emissions scandal escalated after it emerged that the company had deliberately used software to manipulate emissions tests. The company faced billions in fines and settlements, and senior leaders resigned. [The US Department of Justice records that Volkswagen pleaded guilty and agreed to pay \\$4.3 billion in criminal and civil penalties in connection with the scheme.](#)
- The Post Office Horizon scandal became even more serious because concerns about the reliability of the system were repeatedly dismissed, while affected postmasters were blamed, pursued for alleged shortfalls and, in many cases, prosecuted. The organisation continues to face public scrutiny, substantial compensation costs and a profound loss of trust. [Volume 1 of the Post Office Horizon IT Inquiry's final report examines the human impact of the scandal and the continuing need for full and fair redress.](#)



An effective response cannot always prevent a crisis. It can, however, reduce harm, maintain trust and prevent a difficult situation becoming significantly worse. Many organisations recover successfully from crises. Often, the difference lies not in whether a problem occurred, but in how leaders responded when it did.

An effective response cannot always prevent a crisis. It can, however, reduce harm, maintain trust and prevent a difficult situation becoming significantly worse.

Many organisations recover successfully from crises. Often, the difference lies not in whether a problem occurred, but in how leaders responded when it did.

Red flags: when to move into crisis mode

Most students' unions spend their time operating in normal business mode. Decisions are made through established processes. Information is gathered over time. People have space to reflect, consult and plan.

A crisis is different. That's when you need to step up a gear and switch into crisis mode.

When an organisation enters crisis mode, the pace of decision-making changes.

Crisis mode does not mean panic. It does not mean dropping everything and assuming the worst. Instead, it means recognising that the situation may require a different approach.

When in crisis mode:

- You actively gather information rather than waiting for it to arrive
- You involve the right people earlier

- You increase communication and coordination
- You keep better records of decisions and actions
- You review potential risks more frequently
- You think carefully about what may happen next, not just what is happening now

Many situations that enter crisis mode ultimately prove manageable and are quickly stood down. That is entirely normal.

The purpose of crisis mode is not to declare an emergency. It is to ensure that a potentially serious situation receives the attention, coordination and oversight it may require.

Red flags

The following red flags do not automatically mean you have a crisis. However, they should prompt consideration of whether it is time to move into crisis mode.

Examples include:

- A journalist contacts the union, an officer, a trustee or a society.
- A safeguarding concern is raised
- A legal letter is received
- A politician or political organisation becomes involved.
- A national campaign group becomes involved.
- A story begins gaining significant traction online.
- Students express concerns about safety.
- A major data breach occurs.
- National media become interested.
- Trustees begin hearing about an issue from external sources.

Many situations that become crises begin with one of these warning signs.

A simple principle...If an issue is attracting:

- Significant media attention
- Legal concerns
- Safeguarding concerns
- National attention
- Political involvement
- Significant reputational risk

...consider moving into crisis mode.

One of the most important skills in crisis management is recognising when an issue has become bigger than the person who first encountered it.

When in doubt, it is usually better to move into crisis mode and stand down later than discover too late that a more coordinated response was needed.

Responding to a crisis

Once an issue has been identified and crisis mode activated, the focus shifts to response.

The early stages of a crisis are often the most challenging.

- Information may be incomplete
- Different people may have different versions of events
- Students may be asking questions
- Journalists may be seeking comment
- Social media may be moving faster than the facts

The temptation is often to act immediately. The better approach is usually to get organised, establish the facts and focus on the fundamentals.



The first 60 minutes

Most crises do not arrive with a warning label attached. They often begin with something that appears quite ordinary:

- A journalist emails asking for comment
- A social media post begins attracting attention
- A student raises a serious concern
- A trustee receives concerning information
- A university colleague phones unexpectedly
- A safeguarding issue is reported

In those first moments, it can be tempting to immediately start responding, posting online or trying to solve the problem. Resist that temptation.

The first 60 minutes should be focused on understanding the situation and organising an effective response.

Step 1: decide whether this is a crisis

Not every difficult situation is a crisis.

Ask yourself: are you really in a crisis? It's a high bar:

- Could someone be harmed or significantly affected?
- Is media attention likely?
- Could this damage trust in the union?
- Could this affect the union's ability to operate?
- Is there significant reputational, legal or safeguarding risk?

If the answer to several of these questions is yes, begin preparing a crisis response. It is usually better to stand down a crisis response later than react too slowly.

Step 2: stop normal business

One of the most common mistakes organisations make is trying to manage a crisis alongside everything else.

A significant crisis quickly becomes the priority. This does not mean every member of staff stops what they are doing.

It does mean that those responsible for leading the response need the time and space to focus.

- Meetings may need to be postponed
- Routine communications may need to be paused
- Planned announcements may need to wait

People need capacity to understand what is happening and make good decisions.

Step 3: activate the right people

You do not need everybody. You do need the right people.

Depending on the situation, this may include:

- The CEO or most senior staff member
- Relevant elected officers
- The board of trustees
- Communications staff
- HR staff
- Safeguarding leads
- Relevant university contacts

Do not assume people will hear about the issue through normal channels. Make contact directly.

Step 4: establish the facts

In the early stages of a crisis, information is often incomplete. Different people may have different versions of events. Rumours can spread quickly.

Before deciding what to say publicly, establish:

- What do we know?
- What do we think we know?
- What do we not know?
- Who is gathering information?
- When will we know more?

It is perfectly acceptable to say: We are aware of the situation and are gathering further information.

It is not acceptable to guess. Speculation creates problems that are often far harder to fix later.

Example

At 9am, an Instagram post begins circulating alleging discriminatory behaviour by a student society. The post is being widely shared and several comments are tagging the students' union.

At this stage:

- ✓ Alert relevant staff officers and trustees
- ✓ Establish what is known
- ✓ Identify who is leading the response
- ✓ Begin gathering information
- ✓ Consider whether a holding statement may be needed
- ✗ Do not argue online
- ✗ Do not assume the allegations are true
- ✗ Do not assume the allegations are false
- ✗ Do not issue lengthy statements based on incomplete information

The objective in the first 60 minutes is not to solve the crisis. The objective is to put the union in the strongest possible position to respond effectively.

The first few hours

Once the immediate situation has been stabilised, the focus shifts from understanding the issue to managing it.

This is often the point where students, staff, trustees, journalists and other stakeholders begin seeking information.

They may have questions that cannot yet be fully answered. This can feel uncomfortable. However, responding well does not require you to have all the answers. It requires you to communicate clearly, honestly and consistently.

Assembling the team

No one person should manage a significant crisis alone. Effective responses rely on bringing together the right people, with clear responsibilities and clear decision-making arrangements.

Exactly who is involved will depend on the situation, but there are some common roles that students' unions should consider.

The CEO or senior staff lead

In many situations, the CEO will coordinate the organisational response with the support of the trustee board. They may:

- Oversee decision-making.
- Coordinate staff activity.
- Liaise with trustees.
- Liaise with the university.
- Ensure actions are being followed through.

If the CEO is unavailable, it should be clear who will step into this role.

Elected officers

Officers are often highly visible during a crisis. Students may expect them to:

- Explain what is happening.
- Represent student concerns.
- Advocate on behalf of students.
- Provide reassurance.

Officers should be involved appropriately, but they should not be expected to carry the response alone. Staff support is essential.

Communications support

Someone should be responsible for coordinating communications activity. This may involve:

- Drafting statements.
- Monitoring media coverage.
- Monitoring social media.
- Coordinating messaging.
- Maintaining records of communications.

Communication is only one part of the response, but it is an important one.

Specialist advice

Some situations require specialist expertise. For example:

- HR issues may require employment advice
- Safeguarding concerns may require safeguarding expertise
- Serious incidents may require legal advice
- Data breaches may require technical support

Know in advance who can provide this support and lean on the expertise of your external/lay trustees too.



University contacts

Many crises will require close working with the university. This is particularly true where:

- Students are directly affected
- There is media attention
- The issue involves both organisations
- Significant disruption is taking place

Good relationships built before a crisis are often invaluable during one.

The CARE Model

A simple framework for early communications is CARE.

- Concern - Acknowledge the seriousness of the situation and the impact on those affected. For example: We recognise that students will be concerned by these reports.
- Action - Explain what is happening. For example: We are currently establishing the facts and gathering information.
- Reassurance - Explain why people should have confidence in your response. For example: We are treating this matter seriously and will continue to provide updates as the situation develops.

Identify key stakeholders

Not everybody needs the same information at the same time. Think carefully about who may be affected. This may include:

- Students
- Student representatives
- Staff
- Trustees

- University colleagues
- Journalists
- Regulators

In some situations, students will be the priority. In others, safeguarding partners, trustees or university colleagues may need to be informed first.

Review scheduled communications

During a crisis, review any scheduled communications. This might include:

- Social media posts
- Marketing campaigns
- Newsletters
- Event promotions
- Planned announcements

Content that seemed entirely appropriate yesterday may feel insensitive today. Pausing scheduled content while the situation is assessed is often a sensible precaution.

Start a decision log

As a crisis develops, decisions are often made quickly. Information changes. Memories become unreliable.

Record:

- Key decisions
- When they were made
- Who made them
- What information was available at the time

This can be invaluable later if trustees, regulators, journalists or the Charity Commission (or OSCR in Scotland) need assurance about how decisions were reached.

Communicating in a time of uncertainty

Many people assume crisis communications is about having all the answers. In reality, it is often about communicating while there is still uncertainty.

You may not know exactly what happened. You may not know what will happen next. You may not know when the situation will be resolved. That is normal.

Be honest about what you know: Where possible, separate information into three categories:

1. What we know - information that has been confirmed.
2. What we think we know - information that appears credible but is still being verified.
3. What we don't know - questions that remain unanswered.

This approach can help avoid confusion and prevent assumptions being presented as facts.

Communicate regularly

Silence creates space for rumours and speculation. Even when there is little new information available, it can be helpful to reassure stakeholders that work is ongoing.

For example: We are continuing to investigate the situation and will provide a further update tomorrow.

Focus on trust

People may not remember every detail of your response. They will remember how your organisation made them feel.

- Did the union appear calm?
- Did it take concerns seriously?
- Did it communicate honestly?
- Did it support students?

Protecting trust should be at the heart of every crisis response.

Post-crisis: recovery and rebuilding trust

At some point, the immediate crisis will begin to pass. Media interest may reduce. Social media activity may slow. Attention may move elsewhere.

However, this does not necessarily mean the work is finished. Recovery is an important part of crisis management.

Review what happened

Once the immediate pressure has reduced, take time to reflect.

Questions might include:

- What happened?
- What worked well?
- What could have been handled differently?
- Were the right people involved at the right time?
- Were responsibilities clear?
- Were communication channels effective?

A crisis often reveals weaknesses that were not previously obvious.

For example:

- Missing passwords.
- Out-of-date contact lists.
- Unclear responsibilities.
- Weak escalation processes.
- Gaps in media handling arrangements.
- Decision-making processes that were not thorough

Addressing these issues while they are fresh in people's minds can significantly improve future preparedness.

The purpose of this review is learning, not blame. Most organisations discover things they would do differently next time. That is entirely normal.

The objective should be simple: If this happened again tomorrow, would we be better prepared?

Rebuilding trust

People are often less interested in whether an organisation experienced a crisis than in what happened afterwards.

Students, trustees and stakeholders may ask:

- What was learned?
- What changed?
- Has action been taken?

Where appropriate, consider sharing:

- Outcomes.
- Improvements.
- Lessons learned.
- Changes made.

Demonstrating that learning has taken place can help rebuild confidence and trust.

Remember: a crisis does not have to define a students' union. Often, what people remember most is not the crisis itself, but how the organisation responded and what happened afterwards.

Social media

Social media can be one of the most useful tools available during a crisis. It can also be one of the most challenging.

Platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, Facebook, LinkedIn and X allow students' unions to communicate quickly, share updates, correct misinformation and signpost support.

They can also amplify rumours, encourage speculation and increase pressure on those responding.

The advantages of social media

Social media allows students' unions to:

- Share information quickly.
- Reach large numbers of students.
- Correct inaccurate information.
- Signpost support and advice.
- Monitor student concerns and questions.
- Provide reassurance during uncertainty.

For many students, social media may be the first place they look for information. Ignoring it is rarely a realistic option.

The challenges of social media

Social media rewards speed. Crisis communications requires accuracy. These two things do not always sit comfortably together.

Social media can:

- Amplify rumours.
- Reward outrage and strong opinions.
- Remove context and nuance.
- Create pressure to respond immediately.
- Encourage arguments rather than discussion.

Students' unions should resist the temptation to allow social media to dictate their response.



Do not argue online

One of the most common mistakes organisations make is entering into arguments on social media. Even when criticism feels unfair or when somebody is deliberately trying to provoke a response, arguments rarely change minds. But they do make great screenshots. A calm, professional response is almost always more effective than a lengthy online debate.

Monitor, don't obsess

Social media can provide useful information about how students are feeling. However, it should not become your only source of information.

Remember:

- Social media users are not always representative of the wider student body.
- The loudest voices are not always the most affected.
- High engagement does not always mean high importance.

Use social media as one source of information alongside conversations with students, officers, staff and representatives.

Common mistakes organisations make

- **Waiting too long:** Some organisations delay communication because they are waiting for complete information. Unfortunately, information gaps rarely stay empty for long.
- **Students, journalists and social media users** may fill those gaps with their own assumptions.
- **Assuming the facts will speak for themselves:** Many leaders believe that if they have made the correct decision, people will automatically understand and support it. This is not always true. Good decisions can still attract criticism. Communication still matters.
- **Focusing on blame rather than response:** One of the first questions people often ask is: Whose fault is this? While that may eventually become important, it is not always the most useful question in the early stages of a crisis. A better question is: What is needed from us right now?
- **Saying too much:** Under pressure, organisations sometimes speculate, over-explain or share information that later proves inaccurate. If you do not know something, it is perfectly acceptable to say so. Honesty is usually more effective than guesswork.

- **Saying too little:** The opposite mistake is remaining silent for too long. Silence can be interpreted as a lack of concern, leadership or transparency.
- **Trying to manage alone:** Many crises become more difficult because people wait too long before involving colleagues, senior leaders, trustees or specialist advisers. Seeking support is usually a sign of good judgement, not weakness.
- **Confusing attention with importance:** Not every issue receiving significant attention is necessarily the most important issue affecting students. The key question should remain: What matters most?
- **Forgetting the wider context:** Sometimes an issue that feels local can quickly become part of a much larger debate. Thinking ahead about how others may respond can help avoid unnecessary surprises.

Crisis communications myths

Myth: We should wait until we know everything before communicating.

Reality: By then, others may have filled the information gap for you.

Myth: If we made the right decision, people will agree with it.

Reality: Good decisions can still attract criticism.

Myth: If we ignore it, it will go away.

Reality: Sometimes it might. Often it won't.

Myth: Social media isn't real life.

Reality: Social media can shape how students and stakeholders understand a situation.

Myth: Crisis communications is about spin.

Reality: Crisis communications is about trust.

Myth: Being criticised means we have failed.

Reality: Sometimes criticism reflects disagreement rather than poor decision-making.

Particularly in students' unions, there may be situations where reasonable people reach different conclusions. The objective is not to satisfy everybody. The objective is to act responsibly, communicate clearly and maintain trust.



When there isn't a perfect answer

Many crisis communications examples focus on situations where somebody has clearly made a mistake. In practice, students' unions often face a different challenge. They find themselves navigating situations where reasonable people disagree, competing interests exist, and there is no obvious solution that satisfies everybody.

In these situations, communications remain important, but the underlying challenge is often one of leadership, judgement and values. Students' unions occupy a unique position.

They are charities. They are representative bodies. They are democratic organisations. They often work closely with their universities whilst also challenging them.

This can create situations where there is no perfect answer.

Good decisions can still attract criticism: being criticised does not automatically mean a decision was wrong.

- Reasonable people disagree.
- Competing interests exist.
- Strong emotions are involved.
- There is no solution that satisfies everyone.

The goal is not to avoid criticism altogether. The goal is to ensure decisions are thoughtful, consistent, transparent and aligned with the union's values and responsibilities.

Sometimes people will remain unhappy. That does not automatically mean you have failed.

In complex situations, leadership is often less about finding perfect answers and more about navigating difficult trade-offs thoughtfully and responsibly.

Trustees, governance and the Charity Commission

All university students' unions in Wales are registered charities. Trustees have legal responsibility for ensuring that the charity is properly governed, managed and protected.

During a crisis, trustees are not usually responsible for managing the operational response. That responsibility will normally sit with officers and staff. However, trustees do have a responsibility to provide oversight, satisfy themselves that significant risks are being managed appropriately, and ensure the charity is meeting its legal and regulatory obligations.

This does not mean trustees need to be informed about every difficult issue, complaint or disagreement. Most issues can and should be managed through normal processes. However, trustees should be informed when an issue could have significant implications for the charity, or where Board oversight, strategic decision-making or consideration of reporting obligations may be required.

The President's multiple roles

Students' unions can face a particular challenge during a crisis because Presidents often hold several roles simultaneously.

Depending on the union's governance arrangements, a President may be:

- An elected representative of students.
- A member of the executive leadership team.
- Chair or vice chair of the Trustee Board.
- A student governor of the university.

Each role carries different responsibilities and may provide access to different information.

This can create uncertainty about who should know what and when. It is important to remember that the President knowing about an issue is not the same as the Trustee Board knowing about an issue.

Trustees are collectively responsible for the governance of the charity and need sufficient information to fulfil their responsibilities. If an issue may require Board oversight or consideration of reporting obligations, trustees should be informed appropriately.

Serious incident reporting

In some circumstances, charities are expected to report serious incidents to the Charity Commission.

A serious incident is an adverse event, whether actual or alleged, which results in or risks significant harm to a charity's beneficiaries, staff, volunteers or others who come into contact with the charity, or results in or risks significant loss of the charity's money, assets, services or reputation.

Examples might include serious safeguarding incidents, significant fraud, serious criminal activity, major data breaches, or incidents that present a significant risk to the charity's reputation.

Not every crisis will require a report to the Charity Commission. However, where there is any doubt, trustees should consider whether reporting obligations may apply.

Regulated universities are also required to report certain serious incidents to Medr. Details are set out in [Medr's Regulatory Framework](#) (pages 29 to 37).

Although this reporting duty sits with the university rather than the students' union, unions should be aware that significant incidents affecting students or the institution may trigger reporting obligations. Understanding these requirements can help students' unions engage constructively with the university during a crisis and ask informed questions about how risks are being managed.

Keep good records

During a crisis, people are often busy, information changes quickly and memories become unreliable. Keeping good records can be invaluable.

Consider retaining:

- Key decisions.
- Decision logs.
- Timelines.
- Statements.
- Media enquiries.
- Trustee briefings.
- Key correspondence.

These records can be extremely helpful if trustees, regulators, auditors or the Charity Commission later require assurance about how decisions were reached and actions were taken. Boards may find resources like the NUS Charity Trustee Decision Matrix template useful.

Learner protection plans

Many crises that affect students' unions originate within the university itself.

Examples might include:

- Course closures
- Departmental restructures
- Campus closures
- Significant reductions in provision
- Financial difficulties
- Institutional merger or closure

In situations such as these, students are often concerned about the practical impact on their studies, qualifications and future opportunities. While students' unions will rightly focus on representation, campaigning and communication, it is also important to understand what protections are already in place.

What are learner protection plans?

Learner Protection Plans set out how institutions will seek to support students to continue and complete their studies if they face significant disruption as the result of an external incident or institutional decision-making.

The purpose of these plans is to help institutions prepare for and respond to disruption, while providing a framework for supporting students throughout the period of disruption.

Depending on the circumstances, a Learner Protection Plan may cover:

- How teaching will continue
- How students will be communicated with
- Support for affected learners
- Alternative arrangements for study
- Transfer options where appropriate
- Measures to minimise disruption and protect student outcomes

Why should students' unions take notice?

Learner Protection Plans should be developed in partnership with students and students' unions. Universities should actively involve students' unions in their development and review, drawing on student perspectives to ensure plans reflect the issues that matter most to learners.

This is about more than being consulted on a finished document. Students' unions should have the opportunity to help shape the plan and influence the protections that students can expect when significant disruption occurs.

During a crisis

If a crisis relates to teaching, learning, course provision or the wider student experience, one of the first questions a students' union should ask is: What should the Learner Protection Plan say about this?

The plan should contain commitments, expectations and response arrangements that can help the union:

- Understand the institution's intended response.
- Hold the institution to its commitments.
- Identify potential gaps or concerns.
- Communicate more effectively with students.
- Focus representation efforts where they will have the greatest impact.

A Learner Protection Plan can be a valuable representation tool. It can help students' unions understand what the institution has committed to, ask informed questions, and advocate effectively for students during specific periods of disruption and uncertainty.

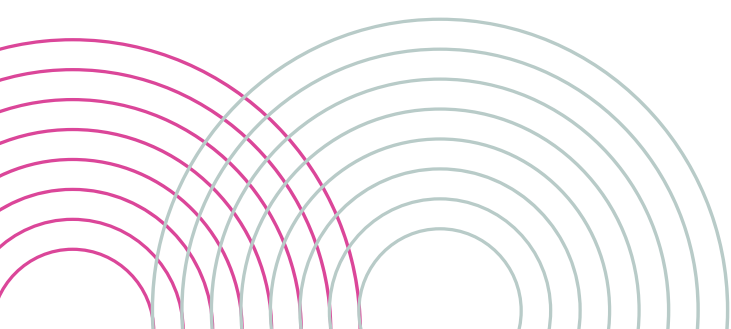
Looking after yourself and others

Crises can be stressful. They can be emotionally demanding, highly visible and unpredictable.

During a crisis, individuals may find themselves:

- Receiving criticism online.
- Dealing with journalists.
- Managing difficult conversations.
- Working long hours.
- Worrying about getting things wrong.
- Feeling personally responsible for the outcome.

These reactions are entirely normal.



You do not have to carry it alone

One of the most common mistakes leaders make during a crisis is assuming they need to solve everything themselves. They don't.

Effective crisis responses are almost always team efforts. Students' unions exist because collective leadership is usually stronger than individual leadership. Seek support from:

- Fellow officers.
- Staff colleagues.
- Trustees
- University partners
- Professional advisers where appropriate

Asking for help is a sign of good judgement, not weakness.

Avoid responding when angry or exhausted

Many communications mistakes occur when people are:

- Tired.
- Frustrated.
- Under pressure.
- Feeling personally attacked.

In these situations, people are more likely to react emotionally, respond defensively or make decisions they later regret.

If possible:

- Pause before responding.
- Ask a colleague to review important communications.
- Avoid making significant decisions late at night.
- Take breaks where practical.
- Step away from social media periodically.

Perfect decisions are rarely made by exhausted people.

Remember - Most crises pass. Media attention moves on. Social media conversations slow down. New issues emerge. In the middle of a crisis it can feel as though every decision is critical and every mistake will be remembered forever. This is rarely the case.

Focus on doing the next sensible thing, seeking support when you need it, and responding in a way that reflects the values of your students' union.

Holding statements

Below are some examples of holding statement you might want to use in the early stages of a crisis. They are intended as starting points only and should be adapted to reflect the specific circumstances.

- **Media enquiry:** We are aware of the situation and are currently gathering information. We will provide a further update as soon as we are able.
- **Safeguarding concern:** We take safeguarding concerns seriously and are following appropriate procedures. We are currently establishing the facts and will provide further information when appropriate.
- **University announcement:** We are aware of the announcement and understand that students may have questions and concerns. We are seeking further information and will continue to represent student interests as the situation develops.

Self-assessment tool: how prepared are you?

The best time to prepare for a crisis is before one happens, this tool will help you understand your areas of strength and development.

Imagine it is 8pm on a Friday evening...

A serious issue is rapidly gaining attention online.

- Students are asking questions.
- A journalist is seeking comment.
- Trustees are beginning to hear rumours.

Could your students' union respond effectively? Use the questions below to assess your readiness:

Leadership and decision-making

Can you answer the following questions immediately?

- ☐ Who would lead the response?
- ☐ Who would make key decisions?
- ☐ What happens if they are unavailable?
- ☐ Do officers, staff, and trustees understand their respective roles?
- ☐ Do you have the trustee contact details?

Communications and information

- ☐ Who has access to your social media accounts? If it's one person, imagine they've gone on a hiking holiday to somewhere phone signal doesn't exist
- ☐ Where are passwords stored?
- ☐ Who can update the website?
- ☐ Who can issue a statement?
- ☐ Who speaks to journalists?
- ☐ Do multiple people have access to critical systems?

Students and stakeholders

- ☐ How would students receive updates?
- ☐ How would staff receive updates?
- ☐ How would trustees receive updates?
- ☐ Have you identified key university contacts?
- ☐ Do you know who else may need to be informed?

Preparedness

- ☐ Have you discussed likely crisis scenarios?
- ☐ Have you reviewed your arrangements in the last 12 months?
- ☐ Do new officers receive any crisis communications briefing?
- ☐ Do you have up-to-date contact details for key people?
- ☐ Have you considered how you would communicate outside normal office hours?
- ☐ Do societies, clubs and student leaders know when to escalate issues?

If several questions were difficult to answer... don't panic.
Many organisations discover gaps when they first undertake this exercise.

The purpose is to identify practical actions that will make responding to a future crisis easier and more effective.

Useful resources

Students' unions may find it helpful to maintain an up-to-date list of key crisis contacts, guidance and documents.

Useful resources may include:

- NUS Charity [trustee decision making matrix](#).
- Charity Commission [guidance on reporting serious incidents](#).
- Charity Commission [serious incident reporting service](#).
- Charity Commission [safeguarding guidance for charities and trustees](#).
- ICO [guidance on reporting personal data breaches](#).
- Medr [Learner Protection Condition and Statutory Guidance](#).
- Medr [regulatory framework guidance on reporting of serious incidents](#).

Final thoughts

Crises are an inevitable part of organisational life. Most students' unions will face difficult situations at some point.

The objective is not to avoid every crisis or to handle every situation perfectly. The objective is to respond in a way that protects trust, supports students, and avoids making a difficult situation worse.

If there is one message to take away from this toolkit, let it be this: Perfection is not the goal.



Medr

Y Comisiwn Addysg Drydyddol ac Ymchwil
Commission for Tertiary Education and Research

Get in touch

Merseyway Innovation Centre
21-23 Merseyway
Stockport
SK1 1PN

uniondevelopment@nus.org.uk

nus **charity**
national union of **students**