



Dealing with external companies

With the student housing market being considered a lucrative opportunity by many, there are a huge number of commercial operations springing up. These operations will often approach students' unions seeking partnerships or marketing opportunities, but it's important to ensure that you have carefully weighed up the suggested benefits against potential pitfalls before you commit to anything.



Introduction

In recent years, student housing has been seen as one of the few markets which has been relatively 'recession-proof'. This perception has led investors to commit sizable funds to the development of purpose-built student accommodation, but has also had an impact on the private rented sector. Every other week, it seems a new company springs up claiming to solve all of students' housing woes, while simultaneously offering students' unions a lucrative partnership deal.

While sometimes these partnerships can be effective, particularly if there is a real shared commitment to student welfare, often they are simply seeking the endorsement of the students' union to lend themselves credibility they wouldn't otherwise get. Housing costs are likely to be students' biggest area of expenditure so it is vital that students' unions keep their risk to a minimum in terms of association with external parties over whom they have little control.

Key questions to consider

1. Is this service one that students really want?

Before you know whether working with an external party is a good idea, it's important to consider whether the problem they claim to solve for students is really one that your members experience.

2. Are they best placed to provide this service?

If this is a service that students would genuinely value, you may want to consider whether this is something that the students' union would be better placed to do or to lobby your institution to do. It is also important to assure yourself of whether the values of the company match those of the students' union, and if not, are there others who provide a similar service who might be a better fit?

3. Is the service good value to students?

It's important that you know how much is charged to students and for what. Getting an idea of the business model that the company works and finding out where their profit lies can be helpful to understand what precisely is being offered. It is important that the cost to students is transparent and clearly communicated. For example, if a company is offering a bill splitting service, this may genuinely make life easier for students, but in order to make an informed decision, they need to know how much they will be paying on top for this service.

4. What are the standards of service like?

An endorsement from the students' union is often viewed as one to be trusted by students and so it's important that you can make yourself as confident as possible that the service will be up to scratch. If it is a new, fledgling company, this can be particularly difficult. If possible, you should always get feedback from students who have actually used the service.

5. How will the relationship appear to students?

Even if you have done all of the right checks, there is always a chance that the service won't be what you expect, or that students will have a negative experience of it. You need to consider whether in any deal that's being proposed the students' union will be considered in any way responsible for this through association. If possible, try to maintain a decent amount of distance between yourself and the company so that it is clear. If you are simply recommending the service to students, you may want to include a disclaimer anywhere you mention the company.

6. Do you have any input into the service?

If you are going to be very closely linked to the service in terms of reputation, you should also be closely involved with the way things actually operate. Without a proper avenue for input, you may risk being unable to influence the service if problems arise, while also being held accountable by your members.

7. Are you able to extricate yourself if you need to?

If a particularly difficult situation does arise with the company, you may feel that you need to break the tie. This can be difficult if you have signed yourself into a long partnership. Make sure you've clearly established the length of your commitment, including any circumstances where you would be able to exit the partnership.



Final checks

- **Feedback from peers:**
Find out if other students' unions have worked with the company and what their experience has been. If they are local, it is likely they may have approached all of the students' unions in the area and they may have some useful thoughts and feedback to share with you.
- **Web research:**
If a company are really dodgy, there are likely to be testimonies online from disgruntled customers. While one rogue review may be an anomaly, if there appears to be a pattern, it's right to be concerned. If a company doesn't have a web presence, they may not be particularly well established and it's therefore very difficult to know what their track record is.
- **Cover yourself:**
If you do have a negative experience of a particular company, remember that posting anything making allegations about their conduct in a public forum (including jiscmail lists) may be considered libellous and could be challenged. Always seek advice.

This briefing forms part of a series, which is being released by NUS throughout the year to help students' unions develop their work on key housing issues and campaigns.