

**Setting up a
Students' Union**

Introduction

This guide is designed to help you understand what's involved, take the right first steps, and build something that is wanted by students, supported by the institution, and sustainable over time. You don't need to have everything in place from day one, and you don't need to do this alone.

Who is this guide for?

- Students who want a stronger collective voice
- Staff who want to strengthen student voice, engagement, and representation
- Senior leaders or governors looking to improve student partnership and accountability

You might be starting from scratch, reviving something that exists on paper but not in practice, or exploring whether a students' union is the right next step for your institution. All of those starting points are valid.

What is a students' union?

In a college or university, a students' union exists to:

- Represent students' academic and welfare interests
- Create opportunities for students to influence decisions
- Support democratic participation, campaigning, enrichment and community building

What's the appetite for a students' union?

Before thinking about constitutions, elections, or officer roles, it's important to check whether there is genuine interest and support.

Talk to students

A students' union only works if students want it. Early conversations should focus on questions like:

- Do students feel listened to at the moment?
- Do they want more say in decisions that affect them?
- Are there issues they would like to change or improve?

This doesn't need to be complex. Short surveys, focus groups, classroom discussions, or existing learner forums can all help you understand what students care about.

Talk to the institution

It's equally important to understand the college/university's perspective. Early conversations with staff can help clarify:

- What student voice or representation structures already exist
- Who leads on student engagement and partnership
- What appetite there is to support a students' union
- What resources or support might be available (space, staff liaison time, funding)

Starting these conversations early helps build trust and avoids misunderstandings later on.

Where to start

Finding the foundations

If you already have student engagement activity, or a students' union existed in the past but lapsed, you might have some of the following already:

- A students' union constitution
- Any code of practice, student charter or partnership agreement
- The institution's student engagement / student voice strategy
- A key staff contact (often a students' union liaison, registry/governance lead, or student experience lead)
- Student representatives on senate/academic board and/or the governing body

If these documents/people don't exist, are hard to find, or feel out of date, that's common. Support is available for NUS Charity members to help develop or review them in a way that fits your institution and the stage your students' union is at.

Representation

Most new or restarting students' unions begin by setting up simple representation structures, such as course reps, year reps or school/department reps. Effective rep systems:

- Are chosen by students
- Have clear and realistic roles
- Provide clear routes for raising issues

Just as important is closing the feedback loop. Students need to see that speaking up leads to action, or at least clear explanations about what can and can't change.

Support and resources are available to members of NUS to help design rep systems, improve how feedback is gathered, and strengthen how outcomes are communicated back to students.

Democracy, elections, and student leadership

Once representation is in place, many students' unions move on to democratic leadership, for example, part-time/volunteer officers, or (in larger unions with more resource) paid sabbatical officers.

Elections

Elections allow students to choose who represents them. For new students' unions, it's often best to:

- Start with a small number of officer roles that match student priorities
- Be clear about paid vs. voluntary roles (and the time commitment)
- Use clear, accessible election processes (including online voting where appropriate)
- Get support to create some election rules that centre the importance of the vote being free and fair

Supporting student officers

Elected student officers represent their peers, lead priorities, and work in partnership with the institution. Depending on your set-up, they may also have formal governance responsibilities (for example, sitting on institutional committees or the institution's governing body).

Training and ongoing support can help officers feel confident in their role, understand their responsibilities, and avoid becoming overwhelmed or disengaged. No one likes feeling like they aren't doing a good job!

There are training events, networking opportunities and resources for members of NUS to help officers and the staff that support them.

Funding and capacity

Growing activity at a sustainable pace

As confidence grows, students' unions may begin to:

- Run campaigns on issues students care about
- Support clubs, societies, sports, and student-led activities
- Provide other related activity for students
- Be trusted with delivery of services, like the representation system

Not every students' union needs to do all of this straight away. Growing slowly and sustainably is far better than trying to do everything at once.

As capacity increases, support is available to help think about sustainability, resourcing, succession, and how to avoid relying on just one or two individuals.

Funding and resources

Funding arrangements vary by institution. Where Part II of the Education Act 1994 applies, governing bodies must take steps to ensure key requirements are met (often through a Code of Practice), and resourcing is usually part of making the relationship work in practice.

For most students' unions, whether they are a separate legal entity or not, the vast majority of their funding comes from their institution.

When things feel difficult

Institutions are supportive of student representation, but progress is not always straightforward, especially if budgets are tight or if things don't go as planned.

If you encounter challenges, focus on rebuilding dialogue and shared understanding. Many of the goals of a students' union align with institutional success measures around student support, academic success and retention.

Support on the journey

Support from NUS Charity is available at every stage of starting, restarting, and developing a students' union. This can include help with:



Constitutions & governance arrangements



Rep systems, student voice, and feedback processes



Planning and delivering elections



Training and supporting officers and volunteers



Building engagement, communication, and sustainability



Clarifying purpose, priorities, and impact over time



Self assessment, reflection, benchmarking and action planning



Sharing practice and problem solving with peers in the sector

If you're considering setting up a students' union and want to talk through your next steps, get in touch with us at uniondevelopment@nus.org.uk to find out more about the support available.

Get in touch

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