



# Internationalising Students' Unions

A guide for new officers | July 2011



national union of students

# Internationalising Students' Unions

This is a guide for new officers which introduces the Internationalising Students' Unions project, details the progress so far and gives guidance on potential next steps.

## What is the Internationalising Students' Unions Project?

The Internationalising Students' Unions project is an NUS project funded by the Prime Minister's Initiative for International Education ([www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi)). PMI funding is being managed by the UK Council for International Student Affairs ([www.ukcisa.org.uk](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk)), who are working closely with NUS on the project. A key aim of PMI is to improve the "student experience" – and this is something which students' unions are especially well placed to deliver.

The Internationalising Students' Unions project has involved 40 students' unions ([www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/students\\_unions.php](http://www.ukcisa.org.uk/pmi/students_unions.php)) in 2010-2011. Participant students' unions have received support to evaluate their existing work with international students, share best practice with other students' unions, and to take action to improve international students' engagement and the interaction between home and international students.

## Why is it needed?

International students are an increasingly important group in UK higher education. Students from outside the UK now make up 15% of the HE population, and there has been a 40% increase in international student recruitment over the last ten years. International students are an important source of income for UK universities, and with cuts in government funding to higher education international recruitment is likely to become even more of a priority.

There are two main reasons why it is important for students' unions to engage better with international students:

### Representation

For students' unions to be respected as the voice of the student body, it is vital that they include all students, including international students. At the moment participation by international students in SU elections is often weak, with few international students standing as candidates and a low voter turnout.

It is important that students' unions are aware of the particular needs of international students and able to represent them effectively. International students often face academic challenges, as they must adapt to a different academic culture and may be working in a language which is

not their first. There are also welfare issues which have a disproportionate effect on international students, especially problems related to the complex UK immigration system and the newly-introduced Tier 4 for overseas students.

### **Student Experience**

The students' union can make a massive difference to the experience of international students at UK universities through advice services, social activities, and the opportunity to supplement their academic learning with volunteering and leadership experience. International students may feel isolated and disorientated upon arrival in a new country and the union can play a key role in helping them become part of the local community and enjoy their time at the university. Students' unions which are more international will also improve the experience of home students, who have the opportunity to make global links and gain new perspectives through cultural interchange.

### **What has happened so far?**

A pilot project in 2008/09 worked with three students' unions to develop a strategic framework and audit tool (<http://goo.gl/bVhnR>). Between January 2010 and December 2011 the project has been extended to 40 students' unions across the UK, working with 20 in the first year, and another 20 in the second year. NUS has been supporting these students' unions to engage with and involve international students.

### **Internationalisation Audit**

The audit tool developed in the first stage of the project is a useful way for students' unions to evaluate their current work with international students and identify priority areas for improvement. The audit is a way for each union to examine its own situation and to provide a starting point for developing an internationalisation action plan. It is a self-assessment tool, rather than a tool for benchmarking students' unions against each other.

### **Pilot Projects**

Project participants have planned and piloted new projects to address priority areas for improvement identified in the audit.

### **Sharing Good Practice**

The project has provided opportunities for students' unions to share good practice with each other through participation in conferences and workshops, through NUS Connect and via the Internationalising Students' Unions newsletter. Several briefings and articles drawing on the experience of unions in the project group and covering a variety of areas have been produced (<http://goo.gl/3Jd7F>).

## **Training**

Training on various topics linked to internationalisation is offered free of charge to students' unions taking part in the project. The training programme will be guided by the training needs identified by participating unions. This training has included:

- Developing an Internationalisation Strategy for your Students' Union
- An Introduction to Cultural Awareness for Students' Union Staff and Officers
- Leadership Skills for International Student Representatives
- An Introduction to Fundraising
- International Networking Days

## **Examples of good practice**

Many unions who have participated in the project have set up new initiatives or strengthened existing projects or processes. There is only space to list a handful of examples here but more detailed case studies will be released later this year.

Many unions have an annual Global or One World Week. Warwick has led the way with this type of event and now annually holds the 'World's Largest Student Run International Event' which grew from a small-scale pilot in 1995. At the London Schools of Economics the week is run by a part-time international officer and committee. As one in three societies at LSE have a national or cultural focus there are a large number of volunteers who want to take part in and help organise the week. Other institutions run similar events under different names, such as the I-Exhibition at Surrey and the Festival on the Hill at Bath.

Reading recently secured funding from the university for the provision of subsidised childcare facilities for students. The 'Little Learners' nursery has 106 children aged from three months to five years from 30 different nationalities. There are resources for children who have English as a second language including dual language books and songs in different languages.

Although many unions have a part time International Officer, Sheffield has had a full time International Students' Officer since 1991 which has increased the representation of international students within the university.

As a result of this project, Edinburgh has introduced a Internationalisation Co-ordinator. This has allowed Edinburgh to run language exchanges, peer support schemes (including proofreading) and increase international participation in volunteering.

## **What will happen next?**

The funding for this project finishes at the end of 2011. A number of publications and activities are planned to ensure that the project is sustainable after this funding comes to an end.

### **Internationalising Students' Unions Training Package**

A training package will be produced so that unions can train staff and officers about engaging and representing international students effectively and increasing internationalisation within unions. Modules will cover an introduction to the international student demographic, issues faced by international students and actions students' union can take to support them, and cultural awareness and intercultural communication. This will be launched in September and we will be offering training on how to deliver the package.

### **Online audit and resource portal**

An online resource hub will be produced and all resources from the project will be stored there. This will include an online and interactive version of the audit tool which will increase functionality for users, allowing unions to complete the audit online. By indicating the score, priority level for work in that area and plans for development the system will generate an action plan based on the audit results. The resource portal will also allow inter-union collaboration whereby unions can share their audit results and action plans (if they wish) to see the results of others for benchmarking across the sector and share examples of good practice and see ideas from other unions.

### **Toolkit**

A toolkit illustrating how to improve in each strategic area will be produced by the end of the project. This will include examples of best practice from the participating unions as well as practical advice and will sit alongside the existing audit tool. When unions have completed the audit and identified areas for improvement they will be able to use the toolkit to guide their action planning. This will be produced by the end of 2011 and will be available online.

### **Internationalisation Network**

A network of staff and officers who are interested in internationalisation will be created and used as a forum for sharing ideas and best practice after the project has finished. It will also allow for networking across institutions to improve internationalisation work. This network is already available through a Jiscmail list (<http://goo.gl/ZIrvC>) and on Facebook (<http://goo.gl/HTSvq>) and will be formalised towards the end of this year.

## **What should you do next?**

If your students' union has participated in the project then ask the outgoing sabbatical officer or relevant staff member to find out about the progress within your union. If your students' union did not participate in the project but you would like to increase internationalisation in your union, complete the audit (<http://goo.gl/bVhnR>) to identify where your union can improve.

A training package will be launched in September and training on using and delivering these materials will run alongside this. Join the Jiscmail list (<http://goo.gl/ZIrvC>) to become part of the network and be kept up to date.

There is a training course for international officers on Wednesday 12 October 2011. All International Officers and officers with responsibility for international student issues are encouraged to attend. Further details will be released nearer the time.

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