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| Quality Students’ UnionsLiverpool Hope Students’ Union26th – 27th October 2017 |
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## Introduction

some general points about the union here – officer team, nss etc, demographics)

Liverpool Hope University is the only ecumenical university in Europe and a member of the
Cathedrals Group. With less than 6,000 students it embraces its philosophy of educating in
the round. Within the Union’s excellent self-assessment statement, the Union provided its own ‘overall assessment’.

 *“In the context of our size and the significant growth and development we have been on over the past five years, we feel we are very good in some areas and overall are a Good Students’ Union. We consistently ‘punch above our weight’ and despite not having the same level of resources (staff and money) that neighbouring larger Unions have, we have consistently achieved a higher election turn out and increased NSS score. Before the introduction of Q26 in 2017, we were the most improved Students’ Union in the UK.
Comparative to our size we have a significant representation on a national level through
NUS boards etc. and we have a strong participative culture and have established a very good
relationship with our Institution.”*

Overall, Liverpool Hope Students’ Union is a **Good** students’ union. Throughout the QSU visit, it was very apparent that the Union had been on a rapid journey of progress over the preceding five years. The Union is acutely aware of its small staff team and the limitations this places on the services they can offer. However, the Union already has areas of excellent practice and is on the verge of an overall Very Good rating against the Quality Students’ Unions criteria. Most significantly, many of the core systems, services, processes and, critically, relationships, were evidently already in place. Many of the indices that are commonly used by students’ union are also showing upward trends at LHSU including voter turn out; course representative numbers and student activities numbers. Overall, this base will enable the Union to focus on identifying its next direction and, resource permitting, creating the potential to impact upon the experience of every individual student positively.

## Findings

Liverpool Hope Students’ Union currently has a three-year strategic plan titled ‘Our Plan’. This plan was developed from large-scale member research carried out by an external research company, together with direct engagement with individual students, officers, staff and the University. An NUS diagnostic report further informed this research. As a whole, this research led to the creation of the four strategic objectives detailed with the Union’s strategic plan (2015-2018); which are as follows:

Leading the Way: “we will empower students to represent themselves & become future leaders.”
Learning for Success: “we will work with each member to ensure they have access to a learning environment that allows them to fulfil their academic potential.”
Living to the Full: “we will create opportunities for students to take advantage of and we will empower them to forge their own opportunities.”
Supporting Communities: “we will foster an environment which removes barriers & enables every student to feel part of both the Hope Community and wider Liverpool Life.“

The Union identifies some specific values or qualities which underpin all of their work. These values are: Champion democracy and representation, be innovative, show enthusiasm, celebrate liberation and diversity and have fun.

The union can demonstrate these strategic objectives were consistent with the specific needs of their members and that their values resonated with their members. This assertion was supported further by the vast majority of the interviewed students. Strategic Planning is **Very Good**.

The University’s corporate goals (2016-2020) identifies a specific role for the students ‘union within the objectives ‘Listen to the Student Voice’. This document notes “The University believes it extremely important that effective ways are found to hear the whole students’ voice in order to respond to their concerns and build a supportive learning community: A well-functioning Students’ Union is a vital part of this endeavour and the University ensures that students are represented in all its major decision-making bodies”. This document also identifies a key goal to ‘Enhance the profile of the SU’.

The Union’s overall strategic plan was understood by the Union’s elected officers and staff who had an understanding of the development of the plan. Knowledge and understanding of the details of the Union’s planning were significantly lower among the membership.

The union was very clearly able to demonstrate the value it places upon its relationships and connections with its members. The Union’s strategic plan ‘Our Plan’ has the opening line “By, for and of the students – there is no better way to encapsulate our purpose.”

The Union is highly aware of how it is perceived by its members and by its key stakeholders, its strengths and its weaknesses. The Union’s General Manager, officers and staff, has worked extremely effectively to build a constructive, trusting relationship with the University. This work is apparent by the University’s offer of a larger and more visible home on the main campus in 2015 and access to a Union branded space at the Creative Campus. Relationships and partners are **Very Good**. The strength of the current relationship, and all the systems and processes that underpin it has created a strong framework for the Unions future work.

There was strong evidence of the Unions plans to allocate time and resources to improving relationships with its members. This evidence included the highly commendable aspiration of the Sabbatical team to speak, individually, to every single member!

The Union works closely with Liverpool SU and Liverpool Guild of Students on many citywide initiatives including Reclaim the Night and the annual sabbatical officer elections.

The union was also able to demonstrate its proactive and beneficial relationships with NUS. In the past officers have sat on the NUS Charity Advisory Boards.

Liverpool Hope Students’ Union is registered charity with an aspiration to become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation within the next two years. The Union clearly is a member-led organisation governed in a manner that provides an accessibility for members to input into its collective decision-making.

The Union bases its governance on the Charities Commission’s ‘Association’ model and is currently in the latter stages of a robust governance review. As part of this review some new, major, documents have been published including a Constitution, a Relationship Agreement and four new Bye-laws. The Unions notes, and evidenced, that an internal review had identified a further four outstanding Bye-Laws, all of which will be in place in the very near future. Overall, in line with the QSU criteria, Governance is **Excellent**.

The union could evidence how it has appointed external trustees with appropriate knowledge and skills to sit alongside the elected sabbatical officer trustees and the appointed student trustees. The Union could also clearly demonstrate the systems to enable an appropriate level scrutiny through the governance structures.

The union could clearly demonstrate that its membership is at the core of its activities and that the democratic principles of inclusiveness, student control, considered judgement and transparency are important to everything the union does.

LHSU’s constitution states “The Union is a member-led organisation. The Union will be governed in such a way as to give individual members opportunities for meaningful input into its collective decision-making”. This commitment underpinned further by one of the Union’s values “Champion Democracy and Representation”. There was clear evidence that this ethos permeated all the Union’s functions.

The Union host four all student forum per year in addition to an Annual General Meeting. In addition to these all student meetings there are frequent meetings of the Student Union executive made up of the three sabbatical officers, three student trustees, four liberation officers and two other part-time officer.

Fair and open cross-campus ballots are undertaken for all major office positions, including the NUS delegate place, in line with the requirements of the 1994 Education Act. Turnout at the Union’s annual sabbatical elections is high; in 2017, around 24% of the membership placed a vote.

The Union could evidence a deep understanding of member engagement in each of its democratic processes and identifies a deep engagement with a limited section of the membership rather than a widespread participation. Overall, Democracy at LHSU is **Good**, with several very good elements.

Liverpool Hope Students’ Union has a small team of just three full-time, year-round staff and one full-time term time only staff member. The Union also employs twenty-four student staff during Welcome Week and has three trainee paralegals.

The Union clearly acknowledges a need to develop their People Strategy, however many of the processes were already in place. There was evidence that staff have an annual opportunity to review their progress and discuss their training needs, so they are developing in their role.

Staff were very engaged in the organisation. They feel they have a role in the development of their union and that they are consulted. While there are formal diarised meetings frequent daily and weekly catch ups and meetings between staff and officers were evident.

There was clear evidence of the officers and the staff working together as a team to deliver the Union’s objectives. Officers and staff were engaged and committed to the Union.

Due to the scale of the people resource a number of the Quality Students’ Union criteria are disproportionately challenging, compared to much larger unions. In line with the criteria, People at LHSU is **Good**.

The union could demonstrate that it communicates with its members and is receptive to communication from them. Engaged members were broadly aware of fortnightly email communications from the Union. It was evident that the most engaged sections of its membership understand parts of what the union does.

A key element of the Union’s strategy to communicate with its members is to promote face to face contact between individual members and the sabbatical officers.

High turnout in elections evidences an awareness of the work of the Union and the effectiveness of the communication of key messages. Overall, Communications is **Good**.

The Union’s primary service is its advice service. Formed in 2014 this service has, to date, worked with more than 800 students. It was clearly evident that LHSU’s advice service is a provision that creates an impact far beyond its very modest size in both breadth and scale. It was described numerous times as, effectively, a student-only citizens advice service.

In the more recent past, the advice service has expanded to take on the entire wellbeing service for the University. To manage this increase in workload, the LHSU Advice Service introduced a new Trainee Paralegal Scheme (TPS). This gives four students – three of whom are reading law – the opportunity for on-the-job training and legal practice experience. This novel, and highly effective, approach is potentially unique within the student movement. Services at LHSU are **Very Good**.

The Union also provides training, guidance, advice and ongoing support for the 250 Course
Representatives at the University. The course rep system was widely recognised and valued by all of the students spoken to during the visit.

LHSU delivers a vibrant and popular student groups provision with fifteen sports teams and eighty-five registered societies. It was evident that these student groups were a major driver of student engagement for the union.

The Union has a system by which all LHSU voluntary roles can be accredited to the University’s Service and Leadership Awards and can be recognised within the University’s HEAR programme. It was evident that throught these high-quality participation opportunities a proportion of the membership often become deeply engaged in their Union. Overall, Participation is **Very Good**.

The Union notes that “[they] are a small SU who consistently manage to ‘punch above our weight’. The sabbatical officer team and staff endeavour to establish strong active networks of student leaders, representatives and campaigners; through skills development training, access to resources, tailored guidance, and one-to-one contact; tracking interactions and building relationships. “

The Vice President (education), in conjunction with the Advice & Student Voice Coordinator
provides training, guidance, advice and ongoing support for the course reps. It was evident that individual course reps felt sufficiently trained and supported to be able to undertake their role effectively.

There was also evidence that the sabbatical officers felt appropriately trained and prepared for their engagement with the various University committees, a view that was echoed by the University.

LHSU were able to identify recent campaigns that were likely to have positively impacted their members. These campaigns included: lobbying for a 24-hour study space, organising petitions to extend dissertation deadlines, provision of free sanitary products and reversing maximum working time rules for student employees.

In addition to these campaigns, the Union also noted the high level of activity of its Liberation Officers and societies. The Union also sends a full delegation of students to NUS national conferences. Representation and Campaigning is **Very Good**.

LHSU notes that “Liverpool Hope Students’ Union works in a complex environment. As a democratic membership organisation and a charity, we recognise the importance of understanding the context in which we work, both the legal framework in which we operate and the wider charity and HE sectors.” The Union has a strong awareness of their small staff team and benchmark against other similar sized institutions. Context is **Good**.

The Union’s self-assessment was able to identify a wide variety of activities, outputs and outcomes linked to their strategic objects. Many of these metrics were able to indicate growth and/or development in the recent part strongly indicating the positive direction of travel. The Union clearly impacts on its membership in numerous, positive ways. Impact is **Good**.

## Recommendations

* As the current strategic plan comes to its conclusion, it is recommended that the Union spends time and resource to identify a clear definition of its fundamental purpose. In undertaking, this task in it is recommended that the Union considers both the views of the membership and the University. It is further recommended that in defining a purpose, the Union identifies outcomes will align with this purpose.
* It is strongly recommended that the Union fully considers how it will be able to demonstrate its outcomes/impacts, aligned with its purpose, from the very first step of its strategic planning process. Recent work by Greenwich SU explores an approach to demonstrating outcomes from the planning stages[[1]](#footnote-1). The concepts put forward by this work can be developed further by adopting an ‘Impact Approach’. This approach is explored further in several resources including ‘Are you leading for impact’[[2]](#footnote-2) published by Inspiring Impact.
* Broadly in line with the approach taken by Greenwich SU, and others, it is strongly recommended that the Union identifies sub impacts/success measures within its strategic plan. It may also be beneficial to underpin these metrics with lower level KPI’s to help short-term goal setting, tracking and reporting. It is recommended that the Union considers creating (operational) plans, sitting below the strategic plan. These plans would precisely detail the activities, timeframes and success measures for each area of work that will contribute to the Union’s sub impacts. For example, where a unions purpose is ‘to enhance each students university experience’, it may identify a sub-impact based on ‘student engagement’. The strategy would identify a qualitative success measure for student engagement whereas; the operational plan would identify the individual activities that would contribute to ‘better’ student engagement, together with timeframes and measurement points.
* It is recommended that the Union considers setting success measures for its campaigns. It practice this could mean that a campaign such as ‘Don’t Rent Yet’ includes an investigation into whether overall contract signing becomes delayed or if students, after engaging with the campaign, sign rental contracts later than students who were unaware of the campaign. This precise approach to success measurement helps to ensure future activities (including campaigns) are as impactive as possible, particularly where resources are limited.
* It is strongly recommended that, as a whole, the Union endeavours to develop a simple, yet robust approach to strategic planning.
* It is recommended that the activities and success measures are incorporated into a formal target setting and appraisal system for all staff. This approach ensure a strong connection between the work of all of the staff (possibly including volunteers and student staff) and the stated objectives of the Union. It is further recommended that the Union adopts exsisting HR processes wherever possible.
* It is strongly recommended that the Union considers further increasing both the breadth and depth of student engagement. The Union could consider adopting an approach (currently very successfully employed by Birmingham Guild of Students) where all activity is purposefully focused on broadening and/or deepening student engagement. If LHSU chooses to adopt this approach, a similar structure could be employed whereby roles are primarily defined by engagement rather than function. In practice, this could mean ‘advice and voice’ would focus on deep engagement and ‘activities’ on the breadth of engagement. This way of structuring has been shown to help Birmingham centre their efforts on their strategic objective of improving engagement.
* When considering the breadth of engagement, the Union could consider formulating specific activities to engage with students that are currently under-represented in the various participation opportunities. These activities should be developed with clear miles stones and success criteria so that the outcome of any work can be readily recognised and reported.
* The Union could consider how it could better communicate its purpose and how this links to its objectives, activities and impacts. This communication would ensure that students have an understanding of the role of their Union, understand its successes, scrutinise performance and be able to direct future work; ultimately enabling to students to be better placed to lead their Union.
* It is strongly recommended that the Union reviews its current touch points with its members to ensure that the engagement opportunities are realised fully. These touch points would include interactions such as officers talking to students on campus and students transactions around sports clubs to students waiting in the area adjacent to the Union offices. It is recommended that the Union explores how these touch points can be used to drive engagement and explores how other touch points/interactions can be found. As noted above, it is recommended that in each one of the Unions activities and actions consideration is given to how it can be used to improve engagement.
* It is recommended that the Union employs some simple mechanism to measure the effectiveness of its communications. In practice, this may simply be a case of communicating a message and then asking students if they received it, understood and acted upon it. This simple ‘impact’ assessment would able the Union to focus its limited resources on the most effective and impactive communication mechanisms.
* Linked to the recommendations above, the Union could consider generating an annual Impact Report. This report would essentially provide target audience(s) with an accessible means to review what the Union has achieved. It is recommended that the Union gives thought to the objectives of its Impact Report (student engagement, funding bids etc.) to fit the format to its purpose best.

## Acknowledgements

1. http://www.changesu.org/?p=1287 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. http://inspiringimpact.org/resources/are-you-leading-for-impact/ [↑](#footnote-ref-2)