

ACADEMIC SOCIETIES

OF THE

FUTURE

A summary of
students' union and
university approaches
to academic societies
in 2021.

Context

Organised Fun specialise in student opportunities and particularly in 2021 have focused on academic societies.

We held a meeting on 25th March 2021 with 78 attendees from students' unions across the UK. Attendees were also asked to complete a survey. There were 40 responses to the survey from 38 different students' unions.

This briefing outlines the notes from the meeting, the survey findings, and a summary of the work we've done in developing ideas for academic societies.

Audience

- Students' union staff
- Sabbatical and part-time officers
- Students involved with academic societies
- University administrators & academics interested in academic societies



WHAT'S THE PURPOSE OF ACADEMIC SOCIETIES?

- Creates a really strong sense of community within that subject and guaranteed space for students to come along to and meet friends on that course.
- A thriving academic society community that allows students to explore and engage with both an academic community and social community in one place that is related to their course. It gives students the opportunities to develop their skills and knowledge relating to their course, but also create lasting friendships and have fun.
- Academic societies to be blended more successfully with the representation system, offering a more balanced social/careers/academic offering throughout the year.

Our research shows that academic society activity broadly falls within these themes:

- 1 Employability
- 2 Community
- 3 Co-curricular
- 4 Representation

We worked closely with Royal Holloway Students' Union and developed this purpose statement for their academic societies:

Royal Holloway academic [societies] are student-led, supported by the students' union and academic department. They exist to enhance the academic experience and deepen connections within the academic community. Academic societies provide spaces for socialising, skills development, and application of knowledge, for fun and peer-supported learning.

SURVEY FINDINGS

In your own words - why do academic societies exist?



Do students pay for membership of academic societies?

Yes: 67.5%

No: 17.5%

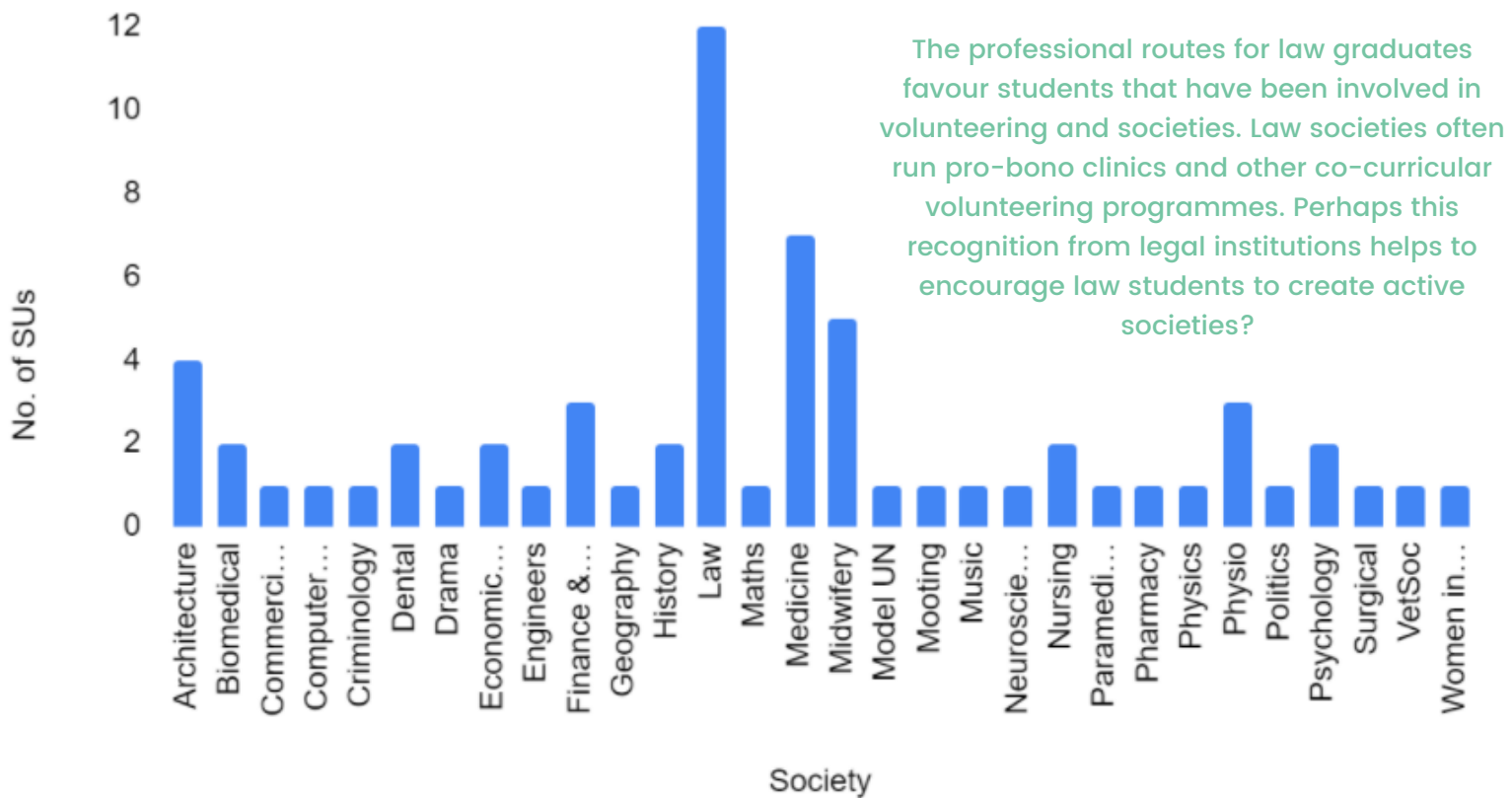
Free text:

- 'Depends on the society'
- 'Membership is required but can be free depending on what committees decide'
- 'Most academic societies don't charge to those who are in the department, but if they aren't within that department some (not all) have a small membership fee of £3 or £5.'
- 'Free for course reps. Societies charge their own membership fee'
- 'This covid year no but normally yes'

SURVEY FINDINGS

Which of your academic societies is the most active?

Our survey showed that in 31% of 38 students' unions, law societies are often the most active academic societies. 18% medicine societies, 13% midwifery, 7% Finance & Investment and 7% Physio societies.



How many affiliated academic societies are there in your SU?

Highest: 300
Lowest: 1
Average: 36

How many unaffiliated academic societies are there in your uni/college?

Highest: 121
Lowest: 0 (though many said they didn't know or were unsure)
Average: 14

Medical Union/Society referenced a few times as having unaffiliated sub-groups

WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS

Aspirations for academic societies: what does success look like in two years?

Targets for academic societies are high:

- Academic society for every course
- Academic society for 70% of courses by the end of the 2021-22 academic year
- At least one academic society in each school/department/subject
- A good range of academic societies for each of our campuses

Types of activity and activity level:

- Academic societies hosting a range of events and activities - not just socials
- At least two events per academic society per term
- Sustainable - a committee handover every year and a diverse group of students involved in the leadership of the society
- Activity designed around student retention in partnership with the institution
- Year long activity plan agreed at start of year - mix of course based and social content
- Activities focused on academic, wellbeing and representation
- Academic society fair for all academic societies
- Embedding peer mentoring programme into academic society/engaging academic societies with existing mentoring/peer support scheme
- Academic societies intramural/social sport teams/leagues

Funding:

- Consistent approach to funding from academic departments
- Long-term funding model that is budgeted for at the highest level of the institution and not 'found' in departmental budgets - allocated to the SU and the department
- Additional funding available in departments to what is offered from the SU
- Funding shouldn't be a favour or goodwill gesture
- Funding as part of the partnership agreement but the department can't dictate the activities of the society due to funding

WORKSHOP DISCUSSIONS

Relationships:

- Two-way communication between committee members and the SU - a good working relationship
- Better dialogue between SU and committee members in order to plan going forward and enable us to create better training
- Creating development goals with the society that don't just focus on organising social activities
- Dedicated staff role to support academic societies within the SU
- Positive relationship with the Education Sabb and the Activities Sabb
- An identified member of staff in every department responsible for supporting academic societies - bringing awareness to rest of department about their activities and events, championing the society and making introductions to other useful colleagues

Structures:

- Clear structure in place for academic societies across the SU and university
- A definition of what makes them an academic society
- Clear agreement about support from the department and the SU for the society - no grey areas - partnership agreement between the society, the SU and the department
- All academic societies have strong links with their department and the SU, so they can have promotion on both sides and know who to contact for what. I.e. can get funding and lecture shout outs from their department, but training and development from the SU.
- Understanding and appreciation at all levels of the university for the value of academic societies - consistent 'buy in' from academics
- Collaborative activities with academic societies in the same school/department and across other schools to encourage cross-curricular learning and development
- Accreditation for committee members and members which counts towards their course

ACADEMIC REPRESENTATION

There were different ideas and approaches shared by the SU workshop group.

- 1 A new structure where student voice and academic society activity happens
- 2 Academic society committee and course representatives are the same people
- 3 A representative from the academic society sits on the same committees as course representatives
- 4 Academic societies connected to the existing course representative structure - feeding in as another voice
- 5 Academic representation and academic societies are distinct and are for different purposes but they are encouraged to communicate



One SU reported:
“Currently auto-enrolment means we have over 11,000 students as part of them, but only 1-2,000 engaging”.

Auto-enrolment

OR

Opt-in

Some SUs are doing/are considering doing auto-enrolment for every student in first year, with opt-out for the following years

Free

OR

Paid

Free memberships requires significant budget reserved for academic society activities as they won't generate any income.

MEMBERSHIPS

Many SUs commented that they had made academic societies free (or much cheaper) for the 2020-21 academic year to encourage engagement in the Covid-19 Pandemic.

GROUP DISCUSSION

What experiences do students' unions have with academic societies and the four activity themes?

What works well?

- Collaborative conferences with/for similar academic societies across different universities
- Good at building those soft skills rather than the hard employability skills.
- A lot of groups reach out to careers opportunities that the careers service might not necessarily be aware of (smaller organisations for example)
- Some relationships with the Careers Department but this could be improved. Some societies have good relationships with external companies
- Students make the connection with industry more beneficial as it's student led
- Workshops, conference, talks from external speakers with a networking/professional development/CV building focus
- Students still seem keen to get the developmental opportunities

What needs improving?

- Would be good to link with careers service and build a better relationship
- When academics aren't on board it's harder for academic societies to run employability activity. Creating those positive relationships is vital, but can be incredibly inconsistent across Schools and Department.
- Helping students quantify the skills which they develop during their time as committee members.

GROUP DISCUSSION

What experiences do students' unions have with academic societies and the four activity themes?

2 Community

What works well?

- Academic Societies naturally creating communities
- Certain societies e.g. Law, Medical have more of a community
- Buddy schemes/peer mentoring works well within our academic societies
- Digitally connecting academic societies together through the Pandemic has been good for sharing ideas
- Can sometimes be overwhelming to decide which club or society to join (if there are so many) so joining your society of the subject that you study can be a really good way to start finding community within it.
- More academic are social communities, rather than academic
- Auto-enrollment to create a sense of community: to create community feel, removes barriers stopping students getting involved. PGR auto enrollment. Easy win to create a sense of community across the University
- Academic societies described as 'academic communities' at huddersfield and kclsu, so a big focus on community, all about community engagement, calling students community leaders, the impact of wording and terminology used for different societies on how the students themselves see them
- Some students previously unable to engage with societies are now able to because activities are online, medical students with placements etc
- Academic societies involved in inductions at the start of the year, helping to build a sense of community from the off

What needs improving?

- Students feel they want to get something out of it academically and employability, rather than focus on socials.
- Student feedback has been they want something happening weekly but not an obligation to attend. Makes it hard for the committee
- Difficult to gain membership virtually. Relies on academic departments buying into that community too, get more engagement if academics promote
- Free membership led to reduced membership engagement - is this related to the idea of "buying in"? Auto-enrollment has often not worked - difficult to empower student leaders

GROUP DISCUSSION

What experiences do students' unions have with academic societies and the four activity themes?

3 Co-curricular

What works well?

- Branching activities that tie into learnt work that spins it in a 'fun' and engaging way
- A lot of students in the same field tend to join their respective societies so an academic support bubble is made naturally, but you do have some other students join purely out of interest
- Provide opportunities in addition to their course, rather than duplicating what they are taught
- Societies provide more support by distributing previous revision material and providing coursework support or opinions on modules that are available

What needs improving?

- Using academic societies as a model for extra (potentially) credit bearing work
- Considerations for formal and informal engagement with academics
- Find some departments don't like students giving certain academic support incase they give misleading advice or information
- Staff taking ownership of the society (turns students off as it's no longer student led)
- Where a skill is essential to degree qualification this should be covered by the course and go through the course system
- Want academics to gain a better understanding of what academic societies are supposed to be for

GROUP DISCUSSION

What experiences do students' unions have with academic societies and the four activity themes?

4 Representation

What works well?

- When reps are on the committee, the link is strong - some course reps tend to overlap with academic society or committee membership
- Some societies have academic reps as a role
- Course reps align with groups but most started by the SU
- Considered putting course reps on committees and using this to link to representation, or including soc reps on staff and student liaison committees. Would be good to use more formal channels
- Societies not necessarily seen as a provider of academic support but promote the support given by departments, rep system etc

What needs improving?

- Some students desire to involve this more, where societies can be more focused on socials
- Bringing Academic society leaders into representation meetings (creating School Rep Teams) with academic staff is the plan
- The desire that we've had is for academic societies to act as a feedback route into department reps - this hasn't been hugely effective - they tend to be more social
- Socs don't represent the course- they work alongside the course but not for them. No real feedback or representation element. Groups are mostly doing events and social activity. Informal feedback happening probably but nothing formal.

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