



# Co-operatives on campus

A mutual approach  
for students' unions

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President of the National Union of Students



national union of students

the co-operative party



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Graeme Wise & Robbie Erbmann, October 2009

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We believe that people will achieve more by working together than they can by working alone. We support the efforts of those who seek success through that co-operative endeavour.

We believe that the only way to create a just and fair society is through power being spread evenly throughout society, and not arbitrarily based on wealth, class, gender or race.

We work to promote co-operatives and all forms of mutual organisation.

We work in partnership with the Labour Party as its sister party to achieve these ends. There are currently 29 Labour Co-operative MPs including ten members of the Government.

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## Foreword

The world of students' unions is always changing very quickly. That is part of being truly student led, and is an important part of our character. I was once President of a very small union in a very big university, and working to cope with the pace of change was exciting and challenging.

In light of that challenge, students' unions and NUS are working hard to develop new strategies for the future – we have to make sure we are in control of the change that is yet to come. As part of that wide effort, I am pleased to welcome the contribution made here, helping us understand how the student movement might respond to the challenges of the near future. The pamphlet is based on sound reasoning, and offers the most coherent account yet of the relationship between the charitable status of students' unions and their mutual heritage. Both of these features are crucial to us, and in acting together they make us unique.



But the real power of this work is in the way it builds on those concepts and shows how co-operative ideas could be put into practice by students' unions, to benefit their members. A range of nine practical solutions is offered, to develop more co-operation across the full range of union activities and services. Not all of those solutions will work in every setting, but I believe union officers and managers can gain enormously from this kind of innovative thinking, especially if it helps them to consider their own strategies for union development.

As a member of the Co-operative Party, I believe that the application of co-operative principles in students' unions can also make our organisations fairer, more democratic and more effective. These are the goals we are always striving for, and this work will help us to reach towards them at a crucial time.

### **Wes Streeting**

**President of the National Union of Students**



national union of students

## A co-operative 'manifesto' for students' unions

1. **Rebalance the union's finances to distribute trading surpluses to the members**, through selective discounting of key household goods and staple foods; this would make the benefits of active membership and participation more real to students and benefit them directly with money in their pockets.
2. Work with universities, local communities and private accommodation providers to **establish joint boards of management for halls of residence and 'student villages'**; this would give more control to students over their living conditions and develop local responsibility and accountability for behaviour and good relations with the community.
3. Work with academic and service staff trades unions to **establish university credit unions**, enabling student members to access more emergency hardship loans from pooled resources; this would provide a crucial financial service and develop a renewed compact with university staff.
4. **Act as the front line for access to the wider co-operative movement** by providing preferential marketing opportunities to co-operative businesses, especially local co-operatives and co-operatives in growth areas such as telecoms, in return for student-only deals; this would give more students access to the advantages of the co-operative trading model, and in turn supply co-operatives with a new generation of members.
5. Jointly with other students' unions, higher education institutions and local organisations, **form energy co-operatives to reduce expenditure on energy and establish better environmental practice**. This would begin as collective purchasing from energy suppliers and in time would allow greater preference to be given to suppliers with a good environmental record; in the future, these energy co-operatives could begin to develop their own sustainable micro-generation activities.

6. **Stimulate the development of micro-enterprises run by students,** enabling them to gain business experience in a low risk environment and potentially avoid doing low-paid shift work that might detract from their studies. It could also make consumer choice for students more diverse. The union would invite open bids from student groups to run a small-scale commercial project within guidelines that the union sets out, and it would then give small start-up grants and loans to support the projects as they get started; the model already works in many cases for clubs and societies, but the idea has never been extended to commercial enterprise.
7. Work with local colleges and schools to support adult and community education through voluntary action by union members; helping to **found 'community learning co-operatives'** where some of the knowledge and skills possessed by students can be accessed by adults in the local community, to build their capability and also build good community relations.
8. **Start new subject-based clubs and societies** which would be run by student volunteers but would have membership and involvement across several institutions and include academic staff, to help open out the curriculum, enable students to consider issues and knowledge beyond their own subject, and put student leadership at the heart of the learning experience. With rising pressures on institutional budgets and on issues like contact time, there is a gap for new thinking on how to extend opportunities for learning and get better value for students.
9. **Create more opportunities for students to make active 'membership' decisions,** in all areas except core representative activity; students should not only join clubs and societies, but could also 'join' the union's social programme, trading operations, campaigning groups and so on. This would build loyalty to the co-operative and the sense of shared ownership and control.

# Britain's sleeping mutuals: how co-operative values and principles can make a difference to students' unions

Over forty percent of all young people now participate in higher education before they reach the age of thirty. This means that they will also find themselves becoming members of a students' union, though many will not realise it.

Students' unions are curious organisations. They are, without exception, charities - following certain legal rulings in the 1980's and legislation passed since that has reinforced this. Unusually for a charity, however, the members are also the main beneficiaries of the organisation's activities, and they control the organisation democratically through elections and other structures. Those activities run right across a spectrum of advocacy and campaigning, social and sporting clubs, and commercial trading – all driven by the members. To make the situation even more complicated, the bulk of students' union income is derived from public sources, via the block grant to universities; and they play an increasingly important role in supporting public policy, in terms of assuring academic quality. All this makes it hard to say where they fit in the landscape of civil society.

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To imagine students' unions as mutual organisations isn't a new idea, but it is an idea worth revisiting. To view them as 'publicly-supported charitable mutuals' may seem like a recipe for an identity crisis, but actually it's a definition that helps to resolve a great deal of complexity. The key principles of member control, member participation and member benefit are put at the centre, and it is the activity they carry out that justifies both charitable status and public funding.

In this paper, we outline the ways in which students' unions have a great deal in common with the co-operative movement, and discuss how their commitment to mutualism could be extended and enhanced through future development.

## Relationship to co-operative principles

The co-operative movement has seven well-established principles, and those principles are discussed here in relation to students' unions. It will be seen that there is a strong compatibility between students' union activities and defining co-operative principles.

## **1. Voluntary and open membership**

In students' unions, membership is automatically given to all students when they register, but any person has the right, by law, to 'opt out' of membership. Membership is limited to registered students (associate membership may be granted to other categories of person), but students' unions typically have comprehensive equal opportunities policies that establish open rights of membership for all students. Once a student has become a member of the union, they may also become a member of several clubs and societies established under the auspices of the union. There is enormous diversity in these societies, for a wide range of interests of a sporting, social, political and religious nature.

## **2. Democratic member control**

Students' unions are controlled by their members through a variety of structures such as union councils, general meetings and committees to lead or oversee certain functions. Most importantly of all, annual election of the major officers of the union ensure that the overall strategic direction of the organisation is set by its members, or at least by their elected representatives. Some students' unions have sought to strengthen their boards in recent years by appointing co-opted members - but in all cases the principle of student leadership and responsibility is maintained.

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## **3. Member economic participation**

Most students' unions' services are aimed at their members, and although there is a secondary market for some commercial services (university staff and visitors on campus, for example), the primary market for union services is comprised of its own members. Services are often promoted on the basis that member spending in union-run venues and outlets is directed into non-commercial services ("not for profit - just for students" is a popular slogan). Unions take great pride in running services where customer (i.e. member) interests go beyond simply what is necessary to establish 'good service', and enter the realm of active welfarism - awards are given annually to unions that do most to promote responsible drinking and customer health, safety and security, for example.

Members also contribute to union funds through subsidiary membership of clubs and societies, or reduce the need for funds by giving their time

and skills as volunteers, contributing to the running of union services and activities. Many unions employ their members where possible, as workers in union shops, bars and other facilities.

#### **4. Autonomy and independence**

Although reliant on public funds passed through their partner institution to operate, students' unions are strongly protective of their autonomy, especially in relation to political, campaigning or social activities. To secure increases in their grant funding, many unions have made agreements with universities and colleges to run certain services in return for additional funds - but without compromising the basic freedom of control attached to 'core' funding. Unions have also developed their commercial operations to ensure they have alternative income sources. In recent years, a new agenda to improve the quality of management and governance in students' unions has sought to limit the risk that institutions might feel obliged to intervene in the management of students' unions.

#### **5. Education, training and information**

8 Students' unions typically employ a full programme of measures to educate and inform their members about the nature of the organisation, the opportunities available to get involved, and democratic rights and how they can be exercised. Participation as an officer of the union itself, or as an officer of an affiliated club or society, or as another kind of volunteer, brings with it training and personal development. Freshers' handbooks and fairs are essential fixtures of union 'induction', along with the extensive social programmes associated with that period. There are also large-scale communication efforts around the central representative role of the union, often through a large network of course representatives.

#### **6. Co-operation among co-operatives**

For many years, students' unions have co-operated to pursue shared aims. The most obvious area is the pooling of resources to lead and co-ordinate national campaigns through the National Union of Students. This kind of co-operation happens at a UK-wide level and also through devolved national organisations for Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland. Nationally, a range of professional networks are also in place around various areas of policy and development.

At a local level, students' unions work together to run joint campaigns on local issues or simply to share resources, services and professional expertise. There are a few examples of students' unions establishing joint student newspapers or radio stations. One major area of co-operation is in collective purchasing - where NUS Services Limited buys supplies in bulk, enabling unions to obtain goods at a substantial discount, as well as providing numerous additional services. At present, a new emphasis is being placed on collaboration, with the hope that unions will establish more joint projects to make savings and secure better provision for members.

## **7. Concern for community**

A key part of students' union work is to form strong bonds with the communities in which they are situated. The demand to do this has become more acute in recent years due to the rise in student numbers and concerns within communities about a perceived process of 'studentification' in some areas. As a result, unions now go to great lengths to promote social responsibility amongst their members. In some places, this goes even further, when unions begin to provide support for local charities through their volunteering programmes, for example. In general, unions seek to trade ethically and with concern for the environment. There is national leadership in this area from NUS and NUS Services, which are engaged in the policy aspects, working closely with central and local government and community leaders.

# Critical issues and new possibilities

The last decade has seen a real reassessment of what it means to be a co-operative or a mutual, and what precisely its relationship with its members should be. Many mutuals have struggled in the past because they have only served a small class of activist members, to the detriment of the mainstream majority. It could be argued that often students' unions have gone down a similar path, with debates around governance and democracy (or an obsession with professional services and welfarism) obscuring the real reason that students' unions exist – which is to provide the services that students collectively need and want.

Within the mutual sector, this issue is typically addressed by segmenting the membership, not only in terms of raw numbers and demographic characteristics, but also by activity and motivations. Once these factors are understood, the focus of the organisation can be much clearer, with less emphasis on factors that only motivate a small minority of members.

The following tables and diagrams attempt to consider students' union membership in this way. An imaginary students' union with a membership of 10,000 people would typically have a membership that could be segmented in the following proportions:

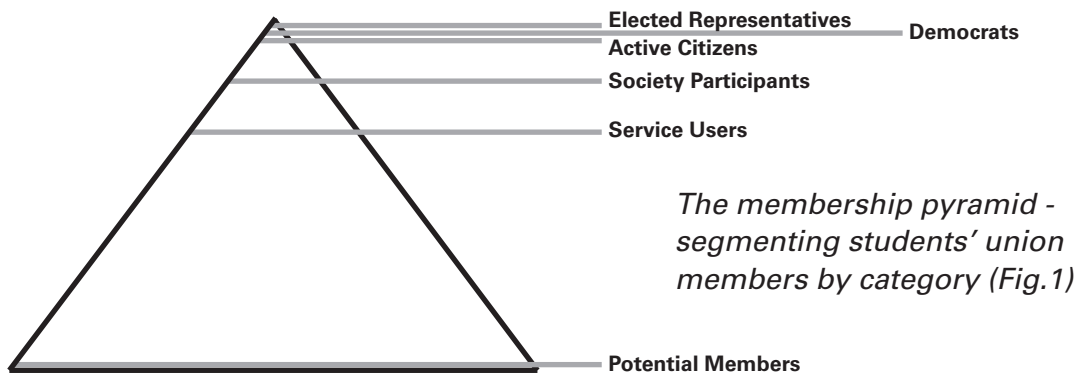
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Member Category	Proportion of Membership
Service users	7,000 (70%)
Society participants	1,500 (15%)
Active Citizens	1,375 (14%)
Democrats	100 (1%)
Elected Representatives	25 (0.3%)

**Service users** – These are members that are happy to use services such as the bar, the shop or the gym, but unlikely to engage with the union on any other level.

**Society Participants** – Likely to be involved with one or two societies or campaigning organisations on campus, but do not take up organisational roles in any of these. Unlikely to vote in students' union elections.

**Active citizens** – Happy to take a role in ensuring that societies or campaigning organisations function or that services are provided on



campus. Will usually vote or engage if motivated by a particular issue, particularly on a campaigning or campus wide issue.

**Democrats** – Heavily involved in the democratic processes of the students' union. Will always vote, often be involved in running campaigns for and may also stand for election.

**Elected** – Successfully elected members of students' union councils.

Figure 1 brings into focus the basic 'facts of life' of most membership organisations, and for students' unions – namely that:

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- Of those who automatically become members of students' unions, the majority will be passive members
- Those that become active (and democratically active in particular) will therefore only represent a minority of the actual membership.

In order to be a successful students' union, it is therefore important to understand the primary focus of most students' relationship with their union. If the focus is all about democracy and standing for elections, or even solely the societies and campaigning organisations in which a number of members are active; this will limit the effectiveness of the relationship between the union and students.

For students' unions to rediscover their mutual roots, this will require them not only to find ways in which they can activate or further engage those on lower levels of activity but also to forge new relationships with 'service users.' This will require a new commitment to services that all students access as part of their broader university experience.

## A new economic approach

One of the most fundamental ways that a students' union can cater more to its members is through pioneering a new economic approach to its activities. This would go beyond a model of member economic participation that supports centrally-provided benefits, and develop structures to deliver direct collective benefits back to the members. At present, a near-universal economic model is employed in which the surpluses of trading activity are directed into the non-commercial services that unions provide for their members: advice, representation, and so on.

A more co-operative approach might involve using a proportion of those surpluses to provide direct benefits to members - benefits that make a real difference to the money in their pockets. It should be considered a legitimate policy to scale back surpluses (and with them, the union's central services), in order to reduce the expenses of members by lowering prices. Price cuts could be focused on essential domestic products, or basic foods, for example. They could also be used to promote social objectives such as reducing the levels of alcohol consumption by maintaining price levels on alcoholic drinks and using the surpluses to subsidise price reductions elsewhere.

It would be imperative, of course, to ensure that the benefits are reserved for members. One obvious possibility, which might be linked with the ideas discussed above, would be to offer a preferential discount to student subscribers of the union's commercial operations. It seems particularly strange, given the existence of a national discount card in NUS Extra, that few - if any - students' unions have chosen to use it in this way, or to set up their own local schemes. One argument might be that unions maintain low prices anyway, but that is precisely the point - low prices for all mean that non-students can obtain subsidies that should be reserved for members, and no sense of member obligation to the collective enterprise that makes the low prices possible is engendered.

In the private sector, loyalty cards are now commonplace; in students' unions, the confluence of diverse services ranging from shops to licensed trade could produce, if properly stimulated, the conditions for a different kind of social and mutual loyalty. This, in turn, could confer market advantages for unions in the longer term.

## **Open new areas of development**

Students' unions could also actively develop new programmes and activities in collaboration with - or simply by borrowing from - the wider co-operative movement. This has become an especially exciting prospect with the general downturn in the wider economy, and the likely impact on students. The conditions are right, for example, to develop credit unions led by students' unions, providing a new, mutual approach to problems of student hardship. Students' unions could act as gateways to products and services provided by other co-operatives, such as mobile phone and other telecommunications services, printing services or financial services - where better value and quality can often be obtained.

There are significant opportunities to be grasped on the issue of housing. Pressure of increasing student numbers and financial constraints on universities and colleges have led to huge expansion by private sector operators. It is widely felt that an alternative form of housing provision led by students' unions should be developed. There are several co-operative housing models that could be applied to this challenge. In cases where sources of large-scale capital could be found, students' unions could directly collaborate in construction projects - but this could probably only happen in a small number of locations. More accessible models of tenant co-operatives for management purposes could be applied in more cases. In this kind of model, management of existing housing facilities would be transferred to student co-operatives by institutions who would be able to make considerable savings by doing so. There would obviously be benefits associated with social cohesion and the promotion of student citizenship.

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## **Devolve power, responsibility and action**

The third shift of policy and practice to pursue a mutual approach must be to devolve power and responsibility to self-managing groups, within the union. We have already discussed the extensive tradition within students' unions of having clubs and societies, which are usually run by their own members and according to their own rules. They are often the site of the purest form of co-operation within students' unions, as they rely strongly on voluntary work to keep things moving, and the benefits of collective action are felt most strongly by the members involved. In the context of this paper, they might be seen as 'micro co-operatives'. These clubs are often provided with support by the central union administration, mainly in terms

of professional staff support and financial support. However, unions can always do more with less resource by trusting members to take the strain where possible, and only intervening where necessary to facilitate success.

A more co-operative approach would have to include a significant expansion of this devolved approach across a wider range of union activities. This makes particular sense given the recent trend in governance reform that tends towards more conventional 'board-centred' governance models, where the hope is that students' union boards can take a strategic overview and not become buried in detail or day-to-day operations. Some unions already set up autonomous societies to lead and co-ordinate campaigns, rather than reserve that function to 'the board' or equivalent. This should be seen as a healthy way of pursuing union aims while involving more volunteers and creating a sense of collective responsibility; the proper role of senior union officers in leading campaigns being maintained through their active participation in the 'devolved' group.

There would be no fundamental difference in establishing self-managing groups of course representatives and others involved in education policy. Such an approach could therefore act as the bridge between an 'organising' approach to campaigns and other approaches to advocacy and representation.

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## **A new approach to membership**

It is essential to promote active membership for the co-operative approach to succeed. This means going beyond the literal promotion of membership rights and opportunities mentioned above. It would be desirable, as part of a mutual approach, for unions to require a certain level of member commitment as a basic quid pro quo for the benefits that membership brings with it, by setting up more 'active' membership procedures. But there is a problem here. Students' unions have long defended the principle of automatic membership, most importantly during the debate over what became the Education Act 1994, which was originally intended to neuter students' unions by requiring 'opt-in' membership. The final outcome of the legislation was to enshrine the contrary, 'opt-out' mechanism in law, and this causes a critical paradox in our approach to membership.

It is common sense that a positive choice to become a member of any association will produce a stronger sense of membership in an individual,

and that the effect becomes even greater when it is applied across a group; it is an important device for generating a sense of collectivism. On the other hand, students' unions rely on mass membership as a symbol of legitimacy and to justify the scale of the grant funding they receive from institutions. A compromise approach might therefore be advocated. Membership of the union itself must remain automatic, as the risks to students' unions of relinquishing that principle would be far too great. But, within the union, more use could be made of subsidiary membership processes. For example, membership of union clubs and societies encourages a particularly strong sense of collective endeavor and loyalty amongst the members of those clubs and societies. The underlying idea could be extended to many union services, to project work, and campaigning activity.

When looking at the health of union democracies, there is often a very strong focus on the democratic centrepieces such as sabbatical elections and union councils. These are very important, and indeed many co-operative organisations would be extremely pleased to have such well-established and generally successful structures underpinning membership control and involvement. There is also a case, however, for more democracy as well as better democracy – but more democracy at a lower level, closer to students who are involved on a regular basis. The aim would be to engender loyalty and commitment to the union as a membership organisation, by developing not only democratic structures, but a diverse democratic culture running through the student body.

# Nine ideas for a co-operative future

By directing changes in policy towards these aims and programmes, students' unions can bring a strong dimension of mutualism to their strategies. This would be in keeping with, and a sound development of, the long-standing principles and traditions of the student movement. But it would also open the doors for student organisations to move in a new direction, as part of a wider co-operative movement. Perhaps the most exciting possibility is that students' unions can play a part in promoting co-operation in the long term. They can use their role as a key influence on - predominantly young - people at a key life stage to educate those people about mutual ideas and how they can make a positive difference in action.

Co-operative values and principles can provide a solid foundation for the development of strategies to deliver the best for members, and involve them directly in producing the results. Applying them requires new thinking about the nature of membership, the economic relationship between unions and their members, and how power and responsibility should be shared. It also calls for a closer compact with the wider co-operative movement, to find new ideas and expertise. It's a way of thinking about student unionism that can join together the multiple priorities of good service provision, campaigning and representational effectiveness.

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Here are nine ideas which students' unions could take up for a co-operative future:

**1. Rebalance the union's finances to distribute trading surpluses to the members.** At present, it is common practice for students' unions to plan an operating surplus in their commercial services, in order to provide a wide range of membership services such as welfare advice, job-finding support, student activities, and so on. These are essential services at the heart of what students' unions do, but difficult economic situation will lead directly to increasing student hardship, as sources of family support become strained, and there is now a case for putting some union surpluses back into the pockets of student members. This is a basic, essential practice in most consumer co-operatives, where surpluses are returned to members in the form of a dividend. The charitable status of students' unions makes it difficult to do this so directly, but there is a way to consciously return surpluses to members, through adopting particular pricing policies.

For example, a union that runs retail shops could determine a shortlist of key products to supply at cost price, to include quality basic food and grocery items and essential household products. This would help hard-pressed students to save money, and encourage loyalty to students' union commercial operations. The same principle could be extended to bars and café-type operations, where targeted, very low prices could be set for basic food services, funded by a conscious reduction in surpluses or commensurate selective price rises in other areas, most obviously alcohol pricing where there is often more room to manoeuvre. The effect of these kinds of policies may be even more important on campus-based institutions where students' union services are likely to be the most accessible and convenient to students. Extension of the principle to facilities where students congregate could also support the development of student communities, as part of a general move away from alcohol-centred social spaces and towards social spaces more complementary to learning activity.

**2. Work with universities, local communities and private landlords to establish joint boards of management for halls of residence and 'student villages.'** As it stands, students often feel that they live in low-quality accommodation, with poor service standards; and tend to have little or no redress when things go wrong or need fixing. By the same token, both universities and private landlords often feel that students take no responsibility over the spaces they live in, can cause long-term damage to properties, and are capable of engaging in noisy and anti-social behaviour that can upset other members of their community.

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Through the creation of co-operatives and mutual housing organisations, tenants and residents have been given real control over decisions that affect their lives and created strong and cohesive communities. They have also been shown to provide a range of social and community benefits due to the local frameworks of mutual support that they create.

It is felt that students' unions could learn a lot from the approach of the co-operative movement to housing. More needs to be done to ensure that housing services are responsive to students, and that they have more of a say over how money earmarked for housing is spent. At the same time, universities, local communities and private landlords would relish having alternative avenues through which they can express their own concerns about how student behaviour may be impacting on their property and quality of life.

It is therefore suggested that students' unions work with universities and local communities to establish joint boards of management for halls of residence. These would take full control of the management of the halls, with a majority of places on the board elected from the student community (say one per block). A minority of places on the board would be held by university staff and other stakeholders within the local community. Issues of significance would be dealt with through meetings at which all students, relevant university staff and other identified stakeholders would be able to voice their concerns and have a say in the outcome.

It is also suggested that students' unions work with their universities, local communities and private accommodation providers to establish joint boards of management of 'student villages' or areas of student towns and villages in which there is a high proportion of student residents. These would be less formal in terms of their responsibilities and structures, but would provide a route for dialogue between students, their landlords and local residents. It would provide a voice for students to tackle their housing issues collectively, as well as a means through which they could develop local responsibility and accountability for behaviour and good relations with the community.

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**3. Work with academic and service staff trade unions to establish university credit unions.** Many students will face some form of financial hardship during their time at university. The need for short-term bridging loans can be a particular problem – with many facing significant bank charges for bounced direct debits or standing orders, or living in fear of disconnected mobile phones, gas and electricity. With less available paid work for students, others will require longer-term hardship loans, which in today's credit climate could prove difficult to access – leaving many reliant on a number of high-interest credit cards to supplement their loans.

In the UK it is primarily credit unions that offer affordable credit and banking services to those who struggle to be fully served by mainstream providers. As financial co-operatives, owned and controlled by their members, their structure of governance has traditionally allowed them to lead the way in providing services to many people who are often excluded from mainstream finance. While it is clear that students are able to access a number of banking services from mainstream providers, it is felt that the ability of students to access credit unions may provide them with lower-cost, short and long-term loans, and provide a refuge when caught up in temporary financial need.

We therefore suggest that students' unions work with universities as well as academic and service staff trade unions to establish university credit unions – which will provide affordable loans and high savings rates not only to students, but everyone within the university community.

These type of university credit unions have already been established across the United States, and a lead in this regard has already been taken by First Scottish University Credit Union, which is a credit union for the employees (although not yet the students) of Heriot-Watt, Napier, Edinburgh and Queen Margaret Universities. University credit unions would provide a vital financial service, as well as allowing students to develop a renewed sense of solidarity with university staff.

**4. Act as a liaison between students and the wider co-operative movement.** Many students sympathise with the ethical and value-based approach to business taken by a number of co-operative and mutually owned enterprises and could derive significant benefits from being part of collective, student-only deals. These could range from more traditional forms of business such as food and insurance, all the way through to growth areas such as telecoms and broadband. By the same token, there would be significant marketing opportunities for co-operative businesses.

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Students' unions (and NUS) should therefore act as a link between individual students and the wider co-operative movement, by providing preferential marketing opportunities to co-operative businesses in return for student-only deals – this would give more students access to the advantages of the co-operative business model, and in turn supply co-operatives with a new generation of members.

**5. Work with other students' unions, higher education institutions and local organisations to form 'Collective Power' energy co-operatives that will allow students to save money on their bills and come together to tackle climate change.** Rising and volatile energy costs have been a major source of difficulty for many students, and the issue of climate change has been at the heart of what many students have been fighting for. We all know that the long-term future of our planet is at stake, and that if we do not control future levels of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases then we are heading for a global climate catastrophe.

So far action by students has either been limited to the macro (campaigning with environmental organisations such as People and Planet or Greenpeace) or the micro (promoting energy efficiency and microgeneration on university campuses). What the student movement is yet to explore is a means through which it can act as a hub for real community level action both to help people with their fuel bills and reduce their carbon emissions.

Through collectively pooling their purchasing power, students, higher education institutions, local residents and organisations can all come together to save money and help tackle the threat of climate change. Banding together in this way, energy co-operatives are able to purchase their own energy on the wholesale markets and negotiate affordable deals for state of the art smart metering technology. This should allow students to realise savings of between 10-20% on average.

While these organisations may begin as a practical expression of self-help, they have the capacity to revolutionise the way that students, universities and their communities purchase and produce energy. Once established, the co-operative forms a framework through which students and others can build and own an infrastructure that will reduce their long-term energy costs and manage the reduction of their carbon emissions.

**6. Support the development of student-owned worker co-operatives.** It is increasingly important for students to become more entrepreneurial. The economic climate makes graduate job prospects very uncertain, and conventional shift-work is harder to obtain. At the same time, in an effort to stimulate growth, the government is likely to take steps to support new businesses, especially start-ups developed by graduates. There is some scope for students' unions to get involved in this change, by helping current students to develop business experience and at the same time create new, more responsive services for students in general.

The opportunity is there for students' unions to support the development of student-run micro-enterprises, by providing small grants and loans for finance and/or IT facilities, office space and similar benefits. Individual unions would create a package tailored to their own resources and would invite bids for support from student groups, on the basis of a small business plan. The model would be similar but not identical to the model already commonly in use for student clubs and societies; the enterprises would be

similar in scale, but a key difference would be that the students involved would be allowed to keep an agreed proportion of the surplus (returning the rest to the union).

In the right circumstances, this could be an exciting new way to encourage innovation in student services, and deliver new services in a highly cost-effective way. It would also support the development of skills in business and management, communications and marketing and so on, and create a new route for students interested in those things to get involved in their union.

**7. Work with local colleges and schools to establish 'community learning co-operatives'.** There is a strong tradition in students' unions of voluntary action in support of local charities and similar work, and the development of student volunteering was stimulated in recent years through the Higher Education Active Community Fund, administered by the Higher Education Funding Council. In the next few years, public expenditure will be under significant pressure and there will almost certainly be a reduction in resources in particular parts of the education system, especially adult education and community education where the focus is not on children and young people. This means there is an opportunity, and arguably a civic duty, for student organisations to concentrate some of their volunteering efforts on supporting other parts of the education system where public support is in very short supply.

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The co-operative approach to doing this would involve establishing new partnerships between students' unions (which would supply volunteers with a range of subject specialism), local colleges (which would help recruit and provide general support to adult learners), and local schools (which could provide safe and accessible facilities for volunteers to operate).

The aim would be to put adult learners and experienced undergraduates and postgraduates together, enabling the delivery of a citizens' curriculum including literacy and numeracy, knowledge about local and national politics and history, financial skills, IT skills and so on. This would be consistent with the approach suggested in the recent Inquiry into Lifelong Learning commissioned by NIACE (the National Institute for Adult and Continuing Education). If planned and implemented well, these partnerships could help to support basic adult learning very cost-effectively.

**8. Set up more subject-based societies, to develop student leadership in the curriculum.** The quality agenda in higher education has changed rapidly in recent years to give students far more power, through devices like the 'student-written submission' in quality audits of universities, and agreement to have student reviewers on audit teams. Recent surveys of student opinion have indicated that students want to be more involved in shaping the curriculum, but do not feel they are able to through existing structures. At the same time, it is essential to reinforce the position of professional academic staff, who should retain (and, in some instances, regain) control of the overall curriculum and the direction of study.

A very simple intervention could help to achieve this balance, and improve the educational experience. Students' unions should set up student-run societies to mirror every department and/or subject area in their institution. These would be structured just like any existing student society, with an open membership structure and its own simple, internal democracy. These societies would act as hubs for students to discuss with each other, away from structured classes, issues within the subject that take their interest but are not prominent in the main curriculum; the societies' work would therefore become 'co-curricular', opening up new routes for study and peer support.

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There would be other benefits. Course representative structures, which are common within institutions but often suffer from a lack of involvement and student feedback, could be integrated with the relevant societies and thereby benefit from greater independence. The societies could have a brief not only to facilitate additional learning opportunities, but also to discuss the policies and practices of their department, feeding back through course representatives or directly to named points of liaison in the department. Over time, they could build links with similar activities in other institutions, helping students in particular subjects to access speakers and debates beyond their immediate surroundings.

Such structures could stimulate a new level of student involvement in shaping their learning paths and obtaining support and advice, as well as building up the sense of community around particular subjects and disciplines. This can be quite hard to achieve in the large institutions and many pressures facing students and academic staff in the modern world of higher education.

## **9. Create more opportunities for 'active', instead of 'passive' membership.**

As discussed in previous sections, one of the fundamental tenets of a more co-operative approach is that members must feel involved and empowered on a day-to-day basis. Structures which empower members only through elections and formal democracy are insufficient. The principle of automatic union membership (with the right to 'opt-out') must be defended – but it is commonplace in students' unions to offer subsidiary memberships, most notably of clubs and societies supported by the union. To develop a sense of active membership and therefore member commitment and community, the principle of subsidiary membership should be extended into other areas.

For example, students' union social spaces could each be supported by their own membership structure, with micro-democracy operating a different level to the union's overarching democratic structures and establishing new routes for involvement, as well as loyalty. This kind of model is already traditional in the 'JCR' model operated for many years in collegiate or semi-collegiate institutions, and there is no good reason why it could not be applied in any case where a union operates a number of different and diverse commercial operations, especially if it does so over multiple sites (which is increasingly common).

In the simplest example, payment of a small nominal fee would allow subscribing members to have a more direct say in the running of those facilities, and entitle them to special privileges reserved to subscribers (priority entry, particular events, etc). The union would centrally regulate these fees to ensure they remain low and therefore accessible to all; the aim is not to raise revenues but rather to move away from the 'pay as you go' entry model commonly seen in many students' union events, and back towards a 'social club' model that was originally at the heart of student social spaces.

The same principle could be effectively extended to students' union campaigning activity. In place of simply being asked to come along to campaign meetings or sign petitions, students would be asked to join properly constituted societies set up to run each campaign. There would be links built in with the union's leading officers, if appropriate to the importance of the campaign and especially if it is a campaign of national significance. By asking students to become subscribing members of a particular campaign, they will become more invested in it and more likely to give some of their own time to supporting it. The effect could be enhanced even more by making it easier through these structures for students themselves to take up leadership roles.






## About the authors

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He was a key partner in the development of two flagship NUS publications: *Broke and Broken: a Critique of the Higher Education Funding System* (2008), and *Blueprint for an Alternative Higher Education Funding System* (2009), which together make the case for major reform of the system for funding universities in England.

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Over the last eighteen months, Robbie has co-authored *The People's Rail* (2008), *Co-operative Values in Credit Crunch Wales* (2009) and *Collective Power* (2009). In September 2009, Robbie launched the Co-operative Party's manifesto for the coming election, *A Co-operative Agenda for a Fourth Term*.

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