

Committee Title	Student Voice
Date of Meeting	23 rd October 2017
Item Number and Title/Subject	Quality Students' Unions
Paper Presenter	Kevin Campbell, Student President (or nominee)
Brief Summary of Issues/Topic	<p>This is the Quality Students' Union Final Report from our audit that took place on the 18th and 19th April 2017. This success was communicated to the membership (https://www.GCUstudents.co.uk/articles/very-good-students-association-quality-students-unions), on Caledonian Connected (GCU Staff Newsletter) and to GCU University Court. It was also communicated to the sector through NUS.</p> <p>NUS have developed Quality Students' Unions to assure the quality, standards and overall effectiveness of students' associations.</p> <p>The quality mark is broken down into three core areas:</p> <p>1. Governance, leadership and management How the association manages, plans, controls and monitors its activities. Threshold standards are set in line with good practice and statutory requirements that will not vary greatly from one association to another.</p> <p>2. Activities How well the association does what it sets out to do. How well the association aligns its activities to the needs of its members and how effective these activities are.</p> <p>3. Outcomes The positive impacts the association has on its members.</p> <p>Each of these core areas is further broken down into a series of components, which detail different aspects of a successful students' association.</p> <p>Governance, leadership and management</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Strategic planning (excellent) 2. Relationships and partnerships (very good) 3. Governance (excellent) 4. Democracy (very good) 5. People (excellent) <p>Activities</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 6. Communication (very good) 7. Services (excellent) 8. Participation (very good) 9. Representation and campaigning (excellent) <p>Outcomes</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 10. Review and evaluation (excellent) 11. Context (excellent)

	12. Impact (very good) The report confirms that we have moved from Good to Very Good . We have therefore met this Big Action within The Bigger Plan 2020 (strategic plan).					
Recommendation(s)	Information	X	Discussion		Approval	
	Student Voice is asked to note the Quality Students' Union report.					
Who have you consulted when developing the paper?	Executive Committee Trustee Board					
Staff/Student Protocol	Yes		No		N/A	X
Will any decision approved directly affect the work of staff?						
Should the paper be submitted to any other committee following its consideration/approval at this meeting?	No					
If yes, please state the committee and proposed date of submission.						

Quality Students' Unions

Glasgow Caledonian University Students' Association

18th – 19th April 2017

Introduction

Glasgow Caledonian University (GCU) Students' Association is located in a dedicated building on the edge of the University's city-centre campus. The Students' Association is lead by four officers, supported by a team of staff. The Association has previously achieved a SUEI Bronze accreditation.

Glasgow Caledonian University is a “distinctive, inclusive and forward-looking university that is committed to its social mission to promote the common good”. In addition to the Glasgow campus, the University has a campus in London and New York. Approximately 17,000 students are enrolled, of which approximately 17% are postgraduates and approximately 12% international. The University offers numerous modes of access beyond direct school entry. These modes include entrance into Pathway courses, where a proportion of the course is delivered in a college setting, and articulation courses. As a result, a proportion of the student population enters the University directly into the second or third year.

The Students' Association submitted a comprehensive self-assessment supported by high-quality evidence. Glasgow Caledonian University Students' Association is clearly **Very Good** with some areas of excellence particularly around academic representation, and the Student Leadership Programme. The Association has strong supporting systems including governance, planning consultation and the management of people.

To achieve the Excellent level of accreditation, the Students' Association should consider further developing its research and assessment practices. The Association should ensure its research is sufficiently robust to allow the scrupulous identification of areas for development and the impacts of activities and initiatives. Furthermore, the Association should implement an impact focused approach to its work which would assist the realisation the overarching mission and strategic themes.

The Association judged its attainment against each of the twelve components of the Quality Students' Unions system. The self-assessment document(s) supported these judgements by detailing the actions and activities of the Association and signposting the associated evidence.

The external verification confirms that the evidence provided, further validated by the information gained from the interviews and meetings, provides an acceptable level of assurance to the self-assessment statements and therefore the judgement for each component and overall.

1. Strategic Planning

The Students' Association has recently approved its new strategic plan, 'The Bigger Plan 2020'. The 'Bigger Plan 2020' is a published strategic plan aligned to the needs of its members and linked to the current context in which the Association operates. Strategic planning is **Excellent**. "The 'Bigger Plan' represents a development from the previous 'Big Plan'; developed with more student input, less KPI's and bolder objectives". The Bigger Plan identifies the aspiration:

'That GCU students will have an outstanding experience that will live with them forever.'

The Association also has a statement of its fundamental purpose and identifies the mission statement:

'To represent and enable GCU students to enhance all aspects of their student experience.'

The Association has a statement that outlines the Associations fundamental values, namely:

Diversity, Community, Participation, Fun, Support, Leadership

There was evidence that these values had been considered when the plan was written.

The 'Bigger Plan 2020' is underpinned by a series of management documents, and annual activity plans that detail exactly what the Association plans to do over a fixed period. The Association was able to demonstrate that the majority of its strategic objectives are consistent with the context of the Association and therefore aligned with the needs of its members. There was clear evidence of comprehensive consultation with students and with the University throughout the development of the plan. The University, in particular, had a good knowledge of the plan and therefore the Association's aims and objectives. The overall planning process was understood well by the Association's elected officers and staff.

2. Relationships and Partnerships

The Association was clearly able to demonstrate that it highly values its relationships and connections with its members. Furthermore, the Association could evidence its work to build and maintain strong relationships with members, the institution and other key stakeholders. The relationship between the Association and the University was highlighted in the ELIR Review: "The University's partnership approach is evident through an effective working relationship with the Students' Association and student-led initiatives such as the teaching awards and Student Leadership Programme."

The Association has allocated time and resources aimed at creating a relationship with unengaged members and deepening relationships with engaged members. Examples of this work have included two research projects into how the Association can enhance its provision for articulation¹ students and postgraduate research students. The success of this work is still to be quantified. Overall, Relationships and Partnerships is **Very Good**.

¹ The process whereby students at another institution are admitted to the University with an advanced standing.

The Full Time Officers' Engagement Plan details how the elected officer team aim to engage with as many members as possible. Regular activity includes lecture shouts, coffee on campus events, targeted emails, social media, surgeries, blogs and other events.

The Association is aware of how key stakeholders perceive it. In 2016 in the Membership Satisfaction Survey, 72% of respondents felt that they were members of the Association and 72% were happy with their level of involvement. The Association maintains positive relationships with external stakeholders, both within the higher education sector and local community. Relationships are managed through their Stakeholder Analysis. The Association was able to demonstrate that it has beneficial relationships with some external stakeholders and NUS.

The Association could evidence where it had developed beneficial relationships with other, non-stakeholder organisations including external bars and nightclubs, the on campus Catering Provider and NHS Scotland.

Internal relationships were clearly strong with numerous examples of cross-department working.

3. Governance

The Association commissioned the NUS Strategic Support Unit to carry out a Governance Review in 2016/17. The Trustee Board take the view that the Students' Association has fully achieved the NUS Good Governance Toolkit. Governance is **Excellent**.

The Students' Association notes that "The key elements of our Governance and Democracy Structure include our Trustee Board (and its sub-committees) and our Student Voice (and its sub-committees). There are three sections (Democracy, Governance and Operations) of our student-led organisation that work together to ensure we run smoothly. We have GCU students, our members, involved in every level of decision making". The Association communicates a significant amount of detail around its governance structure (roles, remits, meeting minutes) to its membership.

The Association was able to demonstrate that it has processes and procedures in place to ensure full compliance with its financial procedures and other relevant legislation.

The elected officers are specifically and effectively trained, continually developed and felt able to undertake their role.

4. Democracy

The Students' Association could demonstrate that the democratic principles of inclusiveness, student control, considered judgement and transparency are important to everything it does. Fair and open cross-campus ballots are undertaken for all major office positions, in line with the requirements of the 1994 Education Act. Election turnout in recent years has been around 14-16% of the membership. The Association notes that it has aspirations to move

beyond this level of turnout and continues to innovate with new ways to communicate with members.

The Association has put in place initiatives to ensure that under-represented groups become engaged in elections and decision-making. The Association has specifically worked to ensure that the gender demographic of the elected officer team is more representative of the student population.

The Association recently revised its Full Time Officer model. The new model, in its second year of operation, consists of the election of all four sabbatical posts through one 'Single Transferable Vote' election as opposed to four separate 'Alternative Vote elections'. Overall, there was evidence of a view that the revised model was working well. The Students' Association's annual survey showed in 2016 that 88% of students were aware of the Full-Time Officer role and 76% knew how they were elected. While smaller numbers knew who the current officer team were, or how to get in touch with them, these still represented significant proportions of the student population. Overall, Democracy is **Very Good**. The Association's democratic processes also include the student activities committee structures.

'Student Voice' is the main democratic decision-making body within the Students' Association. This body of members can propose Ideas and scrutinise the work of the Full Time Officers. Students who chose to participate in Student Voice appeared to understand the processes and systems. The Association was able to evidence that decisions made by Student Voice were acted on in a timely way.

5. People

The Students' Association clearly recognises staff as a major resource and values the contributions individuals make towards the Associations overall objectives. The Students' Association achieved the Investors in People (IIP) standard in August 2011 and maintained the accreditation until 2014. The Association plans to re-engage with IIP in the second year of its current strategic plan.

The Association has a Staff Performance Policy. Staff monthly 1:1 meetings are held with line managers to discuss progress on objectives, behaviour competencies, personal development and training. A performance review is held every six months. It was evident that the Association promotes a culture that welcomes continuous learning and the development of all staff equally. Succession Planning is considered across the organisation and enacted through formal progression or informal opportunities, such as secondments or learning opportunities. People is **Excellent**.

The staff spoken to were clearly engaged in many aspects of the Association beyond their job role. These staff felt that they have a role in the Association's development, were consulted and their opinions responded to. The Association has recently introduced a Loyalty Policy which further recognises the particular contribution made by long-term staff.

The Students' Association recruitment process includes completing a confidential Equal Opportunities Monitoring Form.

The Students' Association undertakes a biannual Staff Survey. The finding of this survey is then incorporated into an Action Plan. In the most recent survey, a flexible working aspect of work/life balance was highlighted and is now being investigated.

6. Communication

The Communications and Marketing Strategy, as part of the Association's strategic plan, has the overall aim of promoting member engagement, participation and transparency. The Communications and Marketing Strategy is being reviewed for 2017-2020 to ensure alignment with The Bigger Plan 2020.

Communications had been previously identified as a significant area for improvement. The Association clearly invest a great deal of time and resources into communicating with their members. The Stakeholder Analysis details the extensive research that the Association has undertaken and identified mechanisms for communication. Key messages are conveyed using a range of communication. The delivery of communications is analysed, measured and reported each Trimester. These reports typically include social media platform metrics, website activity and email open rates. The Association also benchmarks its performance against others institutions.

The Association clearly has a strong understanding of which communication methods create an output and which do not. It was evident that this knowledge helps the Association to make informed decisions about investment in communications.

The Association was able to demonstrate effective two-way communication with external stakeholders. It was clearly evident that the Associations key messages are widely known and understood by the University.

The Associations annual survey indicated that 77%, of the students surveyed, were 'satisfied with how [they] get information from the Association'. Furthermore, 72% were satisfied with the volume of information and 71% with the relevance. Also, the 'Why? Research' annual survey identified that 63% of students agreed with the statement 'I know what the Student Association is doing'. These findings clearly indicate that the majority of the membership questioned in the surveys had an understanding and knowledge of the Association's activities, operations and key messages. The systems and process around Communications are **Very Good**.

It was noted, however, that there is still work to be done to ensure that Association effectively communicates with and engages all students, particularly postgraduates, home students and students entering the University through non-traditional routes.

7. Services

The Students' Association offers, either directly or through a partner, some services and facilities to its members. Most of the services offered by the Association have developed over time and are consistent with services offered by other students' unions. The services directly provided by the Association include an advice centre, computer labs and social learning spaces.

There were clear examples of services that have been created, adjusted or developed in response to member feedback primarily gained through the annual surveys. Feedback, particularly through the National Student Survey, indicated a need for social spaces on campus and within the Students' Association Building. Launched in September 2013, working with the GCU catering provider and the University, the Student Bistro was opened in the Students' Association Building. There were additional examples where the Association has opted to work in partnership with other organisations or companies to best deliver some of its services. These examples included nighttime entertainment and a joint Nightline service. Overall, services are **Excellent** at the Students' Association.

8. Participation

"The Students' Association actively encourages participation by publishing a yearly Student Handbook, and this handbook is sent each year to every first-year student from the UK and Ireland and is available on campus". It was evident that engaged members have a good awareness of some of the participation opportunities. Participation was **Very Good**.

The Association was able to demonstrate that students were able to contribute to the decision-making processes through involvement in Student Voice. Additionally, students can submit ideas and suggestions for consideration directly through the Students' Association website. It was noted, however, that knowledge of these participation opportunities was low among all of the members interviewed.

The Students' Association is taking part in the NUS Volunteer Engagement Survey in 2016/17 to further understanding of volunteer experiences and feedback. The Association note that volunteering is an intrinsic part of the Students' Association and have set an involvement KPI within The Bigger Plan 2020. In January 2017 the Students' Association successfully achieved the Investing in Volunteers Accreditation.

The Association could evidence significant training and support for volunteers. This was evident in the details of the comprehensive training given to club and society committee members.

The Students' Association notes that it is a campaigning organisation. The Association uses a 'Campaign Toolkit' to support student campaigns.

9. Representation and Campaigning

The Students' Association states; "At Glasgow Caledonian University there are student representatives involved in decision making as all levels within the institution and the Students' Association". The University reflected this view. The Students' Association was able to evidence a comprehensive training programme for student representatives. Each academic programme elects Class Reps to raise issues at Student Staff Consultative Groups and Programme Boards to improve the student learning experience. The Students' Association provides Class Rep Training and support. Sparqs evidenced the Class Rep Training as being good sector practice. As a result, class representatives are aware of the main aspects of their role and felt able to undertake them.

The Association has also been able to work in partnership with the University to review and implement a new Student Partnership Agreement. This document is a clear testament to the strength of the relationship between the Association and the University and the value placed on student representation.

The four annually elected Full Time Officers represent students within the University. Each Full Time Officer has a focus on representation and campaigning together with specific responsibility for an academic school. There was very clear evidence that the University greatly valued the, sometimes challenging, input of the elected officers and that it was a fundamental part of the Universities strategic objectives.

While the newly elected officer model does conceivably pose the potential to reduce the individual focus on non-academic campaigning; current Representation and Campaigning is clearly **Excellent**.

The Association could also show that its elected officers and other members participate in NUS events and represent the views of the Association members to NUS.

10. Review and Evaluation

Review, evaluation and research as a fundamental aspect of the governance, leadership and management of the Students' Association were clearly demonstrated. The Association is meticulous in its approach to evaluation and makes widespread use of surveys and external audits to measure and evaluate the effectiveness of its activities. Review and Evaluation are **Excellent**.

The Bigger Plan 2020 has clearly defined sixteen ambitious KPIs to help measure performance and progress. As a result, the Association has a good understanding of its performance. The Students' Association was able to demonstrate numerous mechanisms to collect data and create comparisons over set time periods including an Annual Student Survey.

The Association uses these KPIs to provide an assessment of its performance to Board, the University and Student Voice subcommittees. It was apparent that sections of the

Association's membership have knowledge of the areas in which the Association is performing well.

11. Context

The Students' Association clearly felt that it had a strong understanding of the context in which it operates. This view was supported by a range of mechanisms to routinely examine the needs and the perceptions of the membership. The Students' Association could also evidence that it regularly undertakes research to better understand the needs of specific groups of students such as part-time, postgraduate, distance learners and liberation groups.

Overall, due to the volume of work undertaken the Associations understanding of context is **Excellent**. However, to maintain this level, the Association should take steps to ensure it can have full confidence in the accuracy of future survey work.

The Association was able to demonstrate an understanding of its current capacity and how this may need to be developed in the future. The Association could also show that it had specifically researched the needs of future members.

There was clear evidence of linkages between the Universities strategic plan and the Students' Associations Bigger Plan 2020.

12. Impact

There was clear evidence of the Students' Association's work to understand and articulate its impact. The Association was one of a small number of institutions to take part in an NUS/NEF Impact Project. This project was designed to help institutions express the value of their activities beyond raw outputs and simple outcomes. To date, the Association has worked on quantifying the impact of Class Representatives, involvement in sport and the Student Leaders Programme. The Association is also giving consideration to increasing the use 'storytelling' and case studies as mechanisms to effectively describe impacts.

The Association was able to evidence that it has historically produced Impact Reports. The Associations Annual Student Survey had identified that some members had expressed an awareness of the activities of the Association, particularly around academic representation. This was reflected by a finding in an Annual Student Survey that 65% of students feel that the Association effectively represents them; the Associations stated mission. Additionally, the University were able to identify some of the Association's key outputs. While the Association does not set specific impact targets, a significant proportion of the surveyed membership does feel that the Association has a positive impact on their experience. Impact is **Very Good**.

Recommendations

1. The Association sets out a high-level vision and mission statement. It is strongly recommended that consideration is given to including measures of 'what success would look like' for each of the themes and their associated objectives. In practice, where the plan states an objective such as "Support sports clubs and societies to increase the inclusivity of their activities to reach out to students from the full diversity of our membership to build student communities.", consideration should be given to what success (in this objective) would look like. The Association has identified sixteen Key Performance Indicators to demonstrate the success of the Bigger Plan 2020 with four year targets set, as well as annual departmental measures. These KPI's are numerical values derived from surveys or other data sources. Having success measures would help both the reporting of impact and supports ongoing scrutiny of performance.
2. The Students' Association Member Satisfaction Survey 2016 is taken from a small sample (~4%) with a heavy skew towards female, undergraduate Health and Life Sciences students. This skew could indicate a self-selection sampling bias rather than a random or representative sample. Of concern is the observation that these over-represented groups could be groups who are disproportionately engaged in the Association. Additionally, while the agreement with the relevance of each of the four strategic themes is high at around 90%; the sample sub-set this result comes from is only 0.4 – 0.5% of the student population. With the level of emphasis on these results, both regarding strategic planning and performance monitoring, the Association could look to either statistically correct the sample across a range of characteristics or, preferably, ensure that future surveys examine a larger, more representative sample of the membership. This approach will ensure that performance can be appropriately managed, the impact of activities assessed and that statements about performance, achievements and satisfaction can be confidently extrapolated to encompass the entire membership. It is noted that both surveys were conducted by external research companies.
3. The Students' Association has recently engaged in a national project to help quantify the impact of certain activities. The Association noted that impact assessment in this form had proven to be very resource heavy and not something that would be sustainable in the longer term. It is recommended that the Association considers 'Impact Focus'² as part of its future planning (both at a strategic and single activity level). The Association could consider identifying detailed impact aims at the planning stage to help in the monitoring of the progress towards achieving these impacts. This could help the Association to focus even more strongly on its aims and aspirations while promoting effective reporting and scrutiny of performance.
4. The Bigger Plan 2020 refers to engaging specific groups of students that include postgraduate, articulation, international and distance learners. Given that these groups of students are those that typically engage the least it is strongly recommended that the Association continues to develop effective strategies, such as outlined within the Stakeholder Analysis, to engage with and positively influence the student experience of these groups. This is particularly pertinent as there is a strong likelihood that the numbers of students that fall

² <http://inspiringimpact.org/resources/are-you-leading-for-impact/#2>

into some of these groups will increase in the future, It is further recommended that the Association considers how it could measure its influence and impact on the student experience of these specific groups.

5. Communications has clearly developed significantly in recent years and now has robust practices and reporting in place. It is recommended that the Association continues to focus on communication as a critical enabler to the delivery of the vision and mission. It is strongly recommended that the Association increases its focus on the impact of communication in addition to the outputs. While output indices such as click rates and likes provide an indication of the success of communications, it is the impacts that should be the goal. Communications impacts could include setting success criteria for reducing barriers to engagement, specific knowledge of 'Student Voice' or increased levels of participation from specific groups. Measurement of these success criteria would link back to the previous recommendation regarding robust research.

6. It is noted that the Students' Association undertakes diversity monitoring within student engagement. It is encouraged to utilise this diversity monitoring to develop specific strategies. This detailed understanding of the students who do engage, and those who don't, will be invaluable for identifying barriers, developing a detailed strategy and monitoring success.

7. It is interesting to hear that the Students' Association is considering developing its Student Bistro in response to student feedback. It could be worth adding additional questions in the annual survey that provide insight beyond broad elements such as perceived 'quality' and 'value for money'. It is also interesting to note that there is an opportunity with the GCU Campus Estates Strategy to review the location of the Students' Association Building. Ensuring student opinion is critical in any new development.

8. Academic representation is clearly an area of both focus and strength that has been further enhanced by the changes to the officer roles. A small number of unions have had significant success at decentralising academic representation from the union/association building. Where this has happened, unions have replicated some central functions within individual schools including an officer presence. The Students' Association could consider exploring the feasibility of this approach in the future as it has been shown to increase student engagement significantly.

Acknowledgments

I would like to extend my thanks to David Carse and Kevin Ward, the officers and the staff for welcoming me to the Association and making the QSU verification process possible. I would like to thank Valerie Webster (Deputy Vice-Chancellor Academic) for her time and input. Finally, I would like to thank the students who made time to talk with me both formally in meetings and informally around the campus.

Steven Symonds
Quality Students' Unions Lead Auditor

Macadam House
275 Gray's Inn Road
London WC1X 8QB
t 0845 5210 262
f 020 7380 0794
e nusuk@nus.org.uk
www.nus.org.uk