

Birkbeck College Students' Union

Getting out of neutral

Our plan for 2017-2020



Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

Contents

- 1. Executive Summary, p2**
 - 2. Our one-page plan, p3**
 - 3. Our purpose, p4**
 - 4. Our organisation, p4**
 - 5. Review, p5**
 - 6. Our members, p5**
 - 7. Our future, p5**
 - 8. Our aim, p6**
 - 9. What we will do differently, p6**
 - 10. Finances, p6**
 - 11. The action we will take, p7**
- Appendix one, p8**
 - Appendix two, p8**
 - Appendix three, p9**
 - Acknowledgements, p10**

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

1. Executive summary

The Union is an autonomous organisation within Birkbeck College. We are an organisational partner as well as a critical friend to the College. Both aspects of this relationship have been improved with the creation of a Turnaround Board (TAB) comprising key people from both Union and College and with an independent Chair. As part of a partnership agreement it may be wise to keep a version of the TAB in place for a further year before winding it up. This would be with amended terms of reference and until vacancies on the Union Board of Trustees are filled.

A diagnostic report, produced by the NUS Strategic Support Unit in March 2016, identified a number of serious weaknesses and the Union embarked upon a turn-around process in July.

Since then the College and Union have been working in partnership via a Turn-around Board (TAB). The TAB has supervised the work of an Interim Change Director who has been given the task of rebuilding the organisation so that it is fit for purpose. The TAB has enhanced the partnership between the Union and the College with improved communication and a far better working relationship.

In early 2017 the Union conducted an extensive membership survey and this has yielded rich data to inform planning and service provision. The major theme in the responses to the survey was one of neutrality; neither good nor bad and hence the title of this report.

In the next three years, our approach will be straight-forward. We will reach out to our members who are Birkbeck students, listen to what they tell us, involve them, support them, celebrate with them and act on what we have been told. We will improve communication, increase levels of participation and make a real contribution to the Birkbeck student experience.

We will provide:

- an authentic and effective representative voice,
- high quality support and advice,
- course related and interest related social, cultural and recreational activities.
- We will create opportunities for:
 - students to meet, mix and to get to know each other outside class,
 - personal development,
 - discussion and debate.

Over the next three years we will:

- develop training and ongoing support for course representatives,
- press for improvements in academic support at Birkbeck,
- continue to support and develop our student led activities,
- provide a programme of events for busy, time-pressed Birkbeck students,
- further develop and consolidate the partnership with the College,
- seek to move to a more accessible position within the Birkbeck estate with better signage, sufficient work stations and storage space

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

2. Our one-page plan

First Gear. During 2017/18, we will:

- Complete a reorganisation of our elected officer posts and permanent staff support in order to make the Union effective,
- Embed new governance support arrangements as part of a revised staffing structure,
- Map the course representatives in place across the College then offer training, briefing, debriefing and organise ongoing support for these key spokespeople,
- Pilot different types of events and activities in addition to clubs and societies with the aim of adding value to a much greater number of Birkbeck students,
- Develop a communications strategy to stay in touch with current Birkbeck students,
- Overhaul and simplify our governance structures and rules,
- Publish simple operational plans for 2017 including key performance indicators so that we know how well we are doing as will our members and other stakeholders,
- Develop an activities partnership with SOAS Students' Union,
- Investigate a suitable organisational quality standard to benchmark what we do,
- Produce an impact report to show how our activities and services contribute to improving the student experience at Birkbeck,
- Review our plan and develop ideas for 2020/21.

Second Gear. During 2018/19 and in addition to consolidating or further developing items above we will:

- Introduce student nominated awards for teaching staff who provide excellent academic support as well as good teaching,
- Introduce a system of recognition for course representatives,
- Organise an event to celebrate and reward course representatives,
- Start working towards a suitable organisational quality standard to benchmark what we do,
- Explore/develop activities partnerships with other Bloomsbury based Unions,
- Investigate income generation options consistent with our charitable objects
- Review our plan and develop ideas for 2021/22.

Third Gear. During 2019/20 and in addition to consolidating or further developing items above we will:

- Complete the work require to achieve a suitable organisational quality standard to benchmark what we do,
- Develop an activities partnership with UEL Students' Union particularly in relation to Stratford based students,
- Review our plan and develop ideas for 2022/23,
- Make a, properly facilitated assessment of how effective our planning methods, structures and services are in order to confirm a three-year cycle of improvement.

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

3. Our purpose

The Union exists to promote the interests and welfare as well as enhancing the experience of our members who are the current students at Birkbeck College. We do this by providing:

- Support and advice,
- A representative voice,
- Social, cultural and recreational activities,
- Personal development opportunities,
- Forums for discussion and debate.

This plan outlines how we will fulfil our purpose over the three year period to 2019/20.

4. Our organisation

The Union is a registered charity and is also regulated under part II of the 1994 Education Act. We are based at Malet Street in office accommodation provided by the College. Offices are tucked away on the fourth floor of the annexe which is due to be redeveloped as part of the College estates strategy. Signage to the Union is poor; there are limited workstations and very little storage space for items such as sports gear. We have indicated a desire to relocate to space better suited to purpose and in a more prominent location.

The Union is a democratic, student led, membership organisation. Our Leadership Team includes paid officers who are elected by their peers. We are affiliated to the National Union of Students and Advice UK. The Union employs a small staff team to help deliver professional support for the services and activities it organises. The support of NUS has been pivotal to the Union during the period of change leading up to creating this plan and will continue as long as we need it.

The Union is funded by way of an annual grant, awarded by Birkbeck College, and generates additional monies through modest mutual trading activity based on sales of clothing and NUS Extra Cards. The Union is still recovering from a collapse in (mutual) retail trading activity in 2012. The organisation was saved by the College providing a significant loan in order to avoid insolvency. That financial support remains in place so that the consequences of a negative balance sheet are fully mitigated.

Service agreements are under development, with the College for HR support, financial and payroll services, IT services and space occupancy and will be signed off ahead of the 2017/18 academic year. Arrangements to ensure good Health & Safety practice are under review.

A Union Development Manager will be recruited to start in May 2017 and new staff posts will be deployed to/recruited to for June/July 2017.

For staffing structure see Appendix one. For elected officer structure see Appendix two.

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

5. Review

A diagnostic report, produced by the NUS Strategic Support Unit in March 2016, identified a number of serious weaknesses and the Union embarked upon a turn-around process in July.

Since then the College and Union have been working in partnership via a Turn-around Board (TAB). The TAB has supervised the work of an Interim Change Director who has been given the task of rebuilding the organisation so that it is fit for purpose. The TAB has enhanced the partnership between the Union and the College with improved communication and a far better working relationship.

In early 2017 the Union conducted an extensive membership survey and this has yielded rich data to inform planning and service provision.

6. Our members

Almost 1300 students responded to the survey undertaken, for the Union, by Red Brick. That is just under 10% of our members and analysis has confirmed that this response does represent the demographic profile of Birkbeck students. We have a great deal of confidence in the results. The survey included a number of attitudinal questions and from these it emerges that the Birkbeck student population can be described in five segments; see Appendix three. Of the segments identified in this research, three are broadly satisfied with their experience. The remaining two are likely to be more dissatisfied and more likely to have seriously considered dropping out. We will prioritise these segments in order to have the greatest impact on their Birkbeck experience. The three segments who are satisfied are less likely to need a 'hands-on' Union but we think that they will benefit from an increased awareness of what the SU is, what it has done and can do to help students. There are also overlaps in the events, activities and services that will appeal across the segments although their motivations for taking part may be different.

7. Our future

We will only succeed if we are relevant to our members, provide the services they need and the opportunities they want. The Red Brick research indicates that the vast majority of Birkbeck students have a neutral view of the Union; they have had little contact and often no experience of the Union. This gives us a blank piece of paper to work on and represents a major opportunity. Over the next three years we will engage with many more of our members. We will listen to what students are telling us, involve them, support them, celebrate with them and act on what we are told.

We will provide:

- an authentic and effective representative voice,
- high quality support and advice,
- course related and interest related social, cultural and recreational activities.
- We will create opportunities for:
 - students to meet, mix and to get to know each other outside class,
 - personal development,
 - discussion and debate.

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

Over the next three years we will:

- develop training and ongoing support for course representatives,
- press for improvements in academic support at Birkbeck,
- continue to support and develop our student led activities,
- provide a programme of events for busy, time-pressed Birkbeck students,
- further develop and consolidate the partnership with the College.

8. Our aim

Along with seeking accreditation against an appropriate benchmark standard, over the next three years the Union will seek to improve our National Student Survey performance and meet or exceed the national average score. To achieve this we will engage with more students, improve our services and expand the opportunities we offer our members.

9. What we will do differently

The future success of the Union requires there to be greater levels of membership dialogue, involvement and engagement and these will give legitimacy to our representation work; we will speak with authority on behalf of Birkbeck students.

We will use the Golden Question which emerged from the Red Brick research to inform the development of the Union and monitor the profile of our members.

We will reorganise the structure and roles of paid elected officers and staff to better support the services and activities provided by the Union.

We will simplify governance arrangements and rules to make the Union easier to understand and use.

We recognise that Birkbeck teaches in the evening but otherwise operates during the usual working day. The Union will organise to be available to students and to fully participate as a partner to the College across the two functional shifts.

10. Finances

Without significant trading income, the Union is almost wholly dependent on grant-funding from Birkbeck.

The Union will synchronise with the College budgeting and reporting cycle. We will begin the process of budgeting and compiling a grant submission in the October which precedes the new financial year beginning in the following August.

As each new financial year approaches, and as part of the college cycle, the Union will be develop an operational budget and grant request submission. The Union will also explore opportunities to generate income with a long-term aim of reducing the dependency on its partner organisation.

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

11. The action we will take

During 2017/18 we will work to the following time-line:

From March 2017 we will pilot different types of events and activities in addition to clubs and societies with the aim of adding value for a greater number of Birkbeck students than now,

From May 2017 we will overhaul and simplify our governance structures and rules,

From June 2017 we will develop a communications strategy to stay in touch with current Birkbeck students

From July 2017 we will publish simple operational plans for 2017 including key performance indicators so that we know how well we are doing as will our members and other stakeholders,

From August 2017 we will develop an activities partnership with SOAS Students' Union,

From August 2017 we will embed new governance support arrangements as part of the new staffing structure,

From October 2017 we will map the course representatives in place across the College then offer training, briefing, debriefing and organise ongoing support for these key spokespeople,

From January 2018 we will investigate a suitable organisational quality standard to benchmark what we do,

From March 2018 we will review our plan and develop ideas for 2020/21,

In June/July 2018 we will produce an impact report to show how on our activities and services contribute to improving the student experience at Birkbeck.

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

Appendix one.

Staffing structure

- A Union Development Manager (UDM) will report to the Board of Trustees with line management support to be provided by the College initially. The UDM will work alongside the elected officers of the Union on a day-to-day basis
- Reporting to the UDM will be a Senior Student Advisor, a Student Voice Coordinator, an Activities Coordinator and a Communications Coordinator; four posts. The Activities Coordinator will include support for Clubs and Societies. The Communications Coordinator will include website development. The Activities Coordinator and the Communications Coordinator will share front of house duties.

Appendix two.

Elected officer structure

Student Leaders: X 2 positions each @ 16-21 hours per week

Liberation Officers X 4 positions each @ 7.5 hours per week

All elected leaders/officers will operate within an annualised hours system. For the Student Leaders, these will be introduced from the summer until the end of the academic year, Liberation Officers would run from September/October again through to the end of the academic year.

This would allow for elected leaders to contribute more time to their officer role when they physically can and in a manner that compliments their part time learning hours at the college.

By allowing officers to 'front-load' their hours, it could also see an increase in productivity and a reduction in officer stress.

This approach should also be more attractive for student parents or students with caring responsibilities to stand for elected office at the students' union.

If the Student Leaders are able to begin their roles as paid representatives in the summer, it also allows for them to attend NUS national training events and to develop effective networks with similar small and specialist institutions outside of the London network.

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

Appendix three.

The Red Brick segments

Our members fall into five groups or segments although as individuals they should not be pigeon holed. The segments cut across the traditional demographic groupings of age, gender, and ethnicity and so on.

24% are passionate about your subject and came to university to explore it further. They are seeking personal growth rather than in relation to a specific career or promotion. They have no pressure to live up to expectations, they are here for themselves and do not measure their achievements against others. University is important but it is only a small part of their life overall. They are proud to be a Birkbeck student and feel they are fulfilling your potential. On the whole they are very satisfied with your experience at the College.

23% are competitive in every sense. They are striving for the best grades in order to progress their career. They have a clear view of what they want to do after they graduate – they probably want to move on to a more advanced role. They are confident and outgoing; they embrace leadership opportunities and take all they can from every experience. They are proactive and engaged. They grab opportunities and work hard to outdo their peers. On the whole Birkbeck is living up to expectation and they are satisfied with their experience here.

21% arrived with a range of goals, hoping to boost employment prospects and for experience but this has fallen short of expectation. They are keen to excel and make friends but may struggle to take what they want from situations. They compare themselves with their peers and may let others dictate what they should be aiming for. They may feel frustrated and let down; they feel excluded and may consider dropping out. They are dissatisfied overall.

18% are unsure what to do with their lives and may have arrived at Birkbeck because they did not know what else to do. They are quiet and reserved and do not like to step outside their comfort zone. They do not know how to get the most out of their experience. They may lack confidence and struggle with aspects of life at Birkbeck. They don't get enough support, are not satisfied and are liable to drop out.

14% are driven to develop themselves and fulfil your potential. They are content to do their best without worrying how they compare with other people. They are confident and go-getting, believe that hard work pays off and they can do anything they set their mind to. They are family orientated and make decisions for themselves and immediate loved ones. They are at Birkbeck with a view to doing something worthwhile and making a difference. They know what they want from their experience and how to get it. They are satisfied overall.

Getting out of neutral; our plan for 2017-20.

Acknowledgements

This plan has been informed by the NUS diagnostic report of March 2016 and the Red Brick segmentation research report of February 2017. The new officer structure is based on a model recommended in a report by Al Powell, from NUS, completed in January 2017.

To date, the project to relaunch Birkbeck College Students' Union has been guided by a Turnaround Board (TAB) the members of which are:

Katharine Bock, Birkbeck College Head of Governance and Corporate Support

Alexandra Brinker, Birkbeck College SU Disabilities Officer and Vice Chair of Trustees

Hana Faber, Birkbeck College SU Women's Officer and Chair of Trustees

Fraser Keir, Birkbeck College Registrar

Dave Parry, Birkbeck College SU External Trustee

Ben Ward, Union Director at the University of Manchester Students' Union, Chair

Keith Willett, Birkbeck College Director of Finance

Many of the ideas were further developed at a staff/elected officer planning day held at University Square Stratford on 24 January 2017.

This iteration incorporates amendments agreed at the Turnaround Board on 1 March 2017.

Mark Grayling

March 2017