The Future

What's coming for HE and how should SUs respond?

JIM DICKINSON, WONKHE SUs

WONKHE
SUs

Strategy

- Boards and the "long term"

But:

- **Volatile**: quick actions needed to events outside your control
- **Uncertain**: future unclear and non- predictable
- **Complex**: Dynamic networks with confusing/conflicting relationships
- **Ambiguous**: Action without certainty of outcome

What kind of board?

1. **Rowing**: Close scrutiny and decision making over particular (or all) aspects of the organisation

2. **Diving**: Largely hands off, but dives when there is a crisis or an issue of interest

3. **Poking**: Managers run the SU, officers lead the "politics", board asks tricky questions of former

4. **Steering**: Board enables work to happen

WONKHE
SUs

What kind of organisation(s)?

- We do things **for people** – they're in need or in crisis and there are risks

- We offer things **to people** – we know what they want and deliver it

- We do things **with people** – we help people to achieve the things they want to achieve

- We provide things that enable people to do things **for themselves**

WONKHE
SUs

What kind of organisation?

- **Charity**: Beneficiaries, classic strategic plan, competing interests resolved at Board

- **Mutual**: Student led with little input from externals other than advice and scrutiny

- **Binary**: Political structures do X, corporate governance structures do Y, some crossover

- **Group**: Looks after fundamentals and a spine, but develops (student led) governance throughout a group

(and – how commercial?)

WONKHE
SUs

Level of control

- **Granular**: Regular meetings, performance measures for everything

- **Aloof**: Sets loose strategy, receives reports, offers some challenge, but almost completely hands-off

- **Annual**: Dives on a regular, calendar basis. Approves 1 year plan but 3 year ambitions.

- **Active**: Adopts different behaviours for different goals or areas of the organisation depending on risk and development
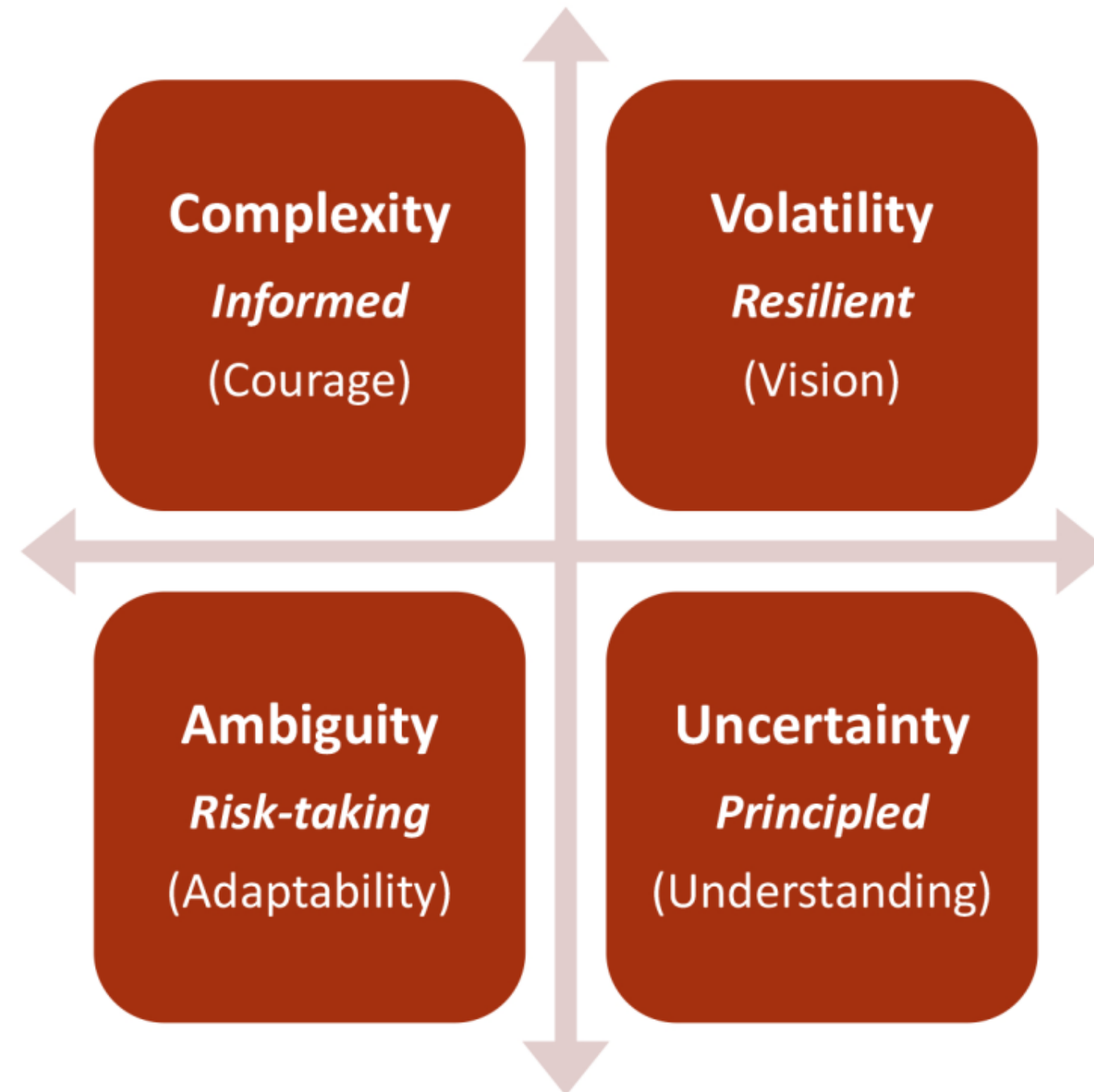
WONKHE
SUs

Measures

- Measures that **demonstrate to stakeholders** that you are doing good things, well, and VFM

- Measures that **inspire and drive performance** of your key staff

- Measures that tell you how the **managers are performing**

- Measures that demonstrate that you are **solving problems and achieving things**

- Measures of inputs? Outputs? Outcomes? Impacts?

WONKHE
SUs

What are you planning?

- The **development of the organisation** – infrastructure, finances, people, services

- The **improvement of the student experience** – their situation, rights, attainment etc

- To **solve particular problems** – with ideas or services or projects or campaigns

- To **involve and engage** – as a marker of legitimacy

- To improve students' **education through their participation**

But what if the world is VUCA?

Complexity	Volatility
Informed	*Resilient*
(Courage)	(Vision)
Ambiguity	Uncertainty
Risk-taking	*Principled*
(Adaptability)	(Understanding)

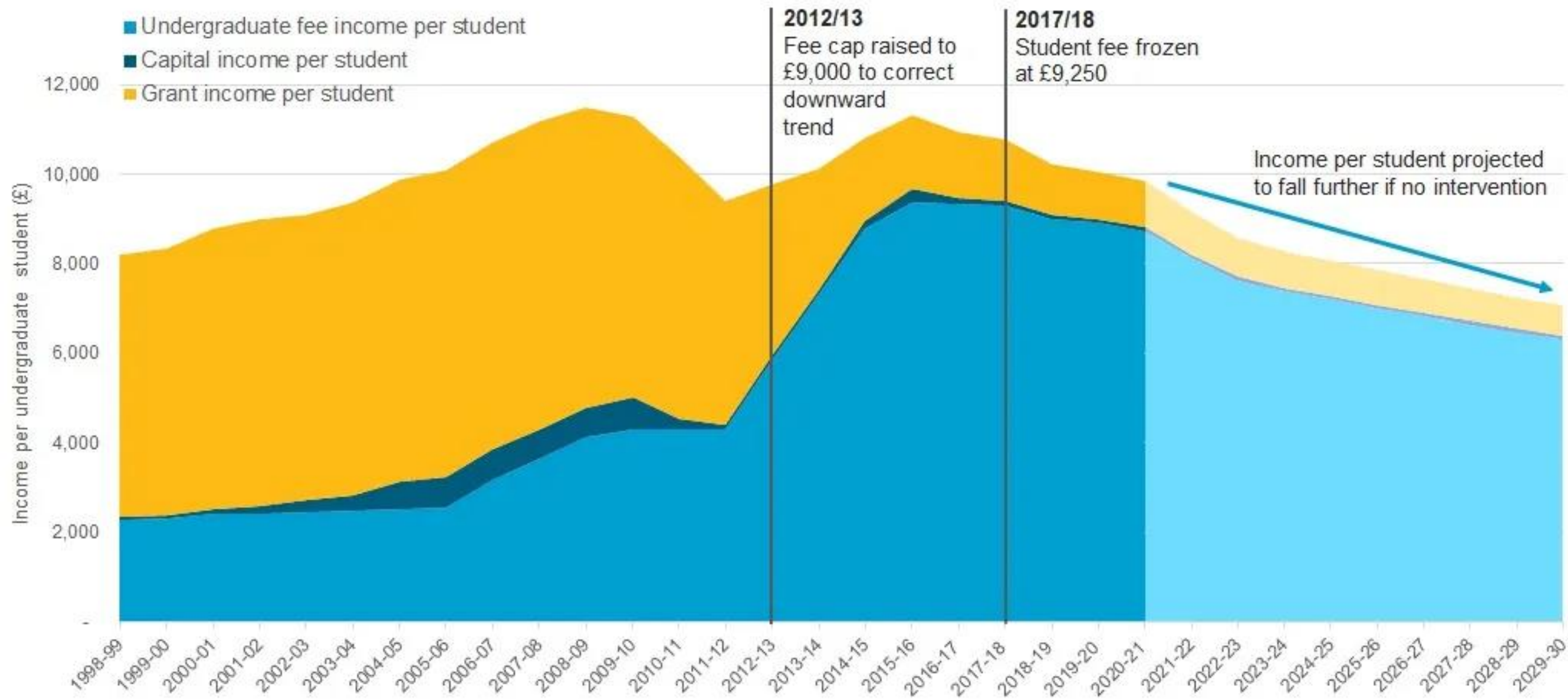WONKHE
SUs

Context: Austerity

- Treasury (as of today) reverting to austerity of 2010s.
- Less fat to cut and higher education can't escape through a loan trick any more

Four options:

- Fewer students go to university
- Graduates pay more back through the loan scheme (inc existing graduates)
- Reduced delivery costs
- Reduced maintenance costs

What if the block grant halved tomorrow?

WONKHE
SUs

Legend:
- Undergraduate fee income per student
- Capital income per student
- Grant income per student

2012/13
Fee cap raised to £9,000 to correct downward trend

2017/18
Student fee frozen at £9,250

Income per student projected to fall further if no intervention

Y-axis: Income per undergraduate student (£): 2,000 / 4,000 / 6,000 / 8,000 / 10,000 / 12,000

X-axis: 1998-99, 1999-00, 2000-01, 2001-02, 2002-03, 2003-04, 2004-05, 2005-06, 2006-07, 2007-08, 2008-09, 2009-10, 2010-11, 2011-12, 2012-13, 2013-14, 2014-15, 2015-16, 2016-17, 2017-18, 2018-19, 2019-20, 2020-21, 2021-22, 2022-23, 2023-24, 2024-25, 2025-26, 2026-27, 2027-28, 2028-29, 2029-30

WONKHE
SUs

Context: Politics

- Hostile to universities, young, diversity, "culture wars" and other SU hobby horses and values

- Highly unstable – risk taking in wring direction swings to deep freezes (and both fiscal and policy drag)

- Unable to address contemporary issues of the day (social media and impacts on political debate and harassment, housing crisis etc)

- Essay crisis culture – wait til very bad and throw plasters and money

- Coping mechanisms become features

What if students had to opt in/join for a fee?

WONKHE
SUs

Context: Students

- More of them
- More diverse
- Less time
- More anxious
- More collaborative (yet)
- More monitored
- Lonely
- Busy and less "immersed"
- Less able to make mistakes

What we know about their lives v what we know about their views

WONKHE
SUs

It's the medium that matters

When the pressure is on and the environment is chaotic or uncertain, leaders tend towards:

- **Small issues**: Micro management, generates feelings of control. But what abut the big picture?

- **Huge issues**: Collective, long term things that need attention, **but...**

- Also a way of avoiding accountability over the "hard" stuff – **medium** issues that require the most attention, response and decision
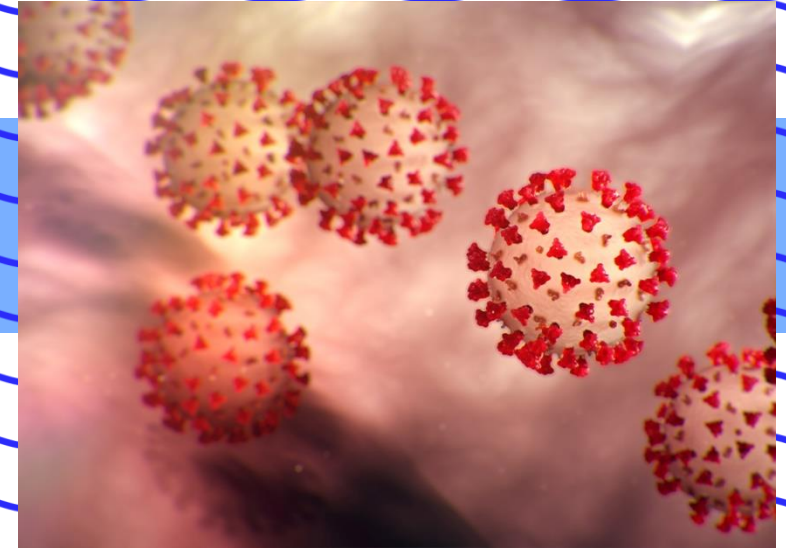

Small Medium Large
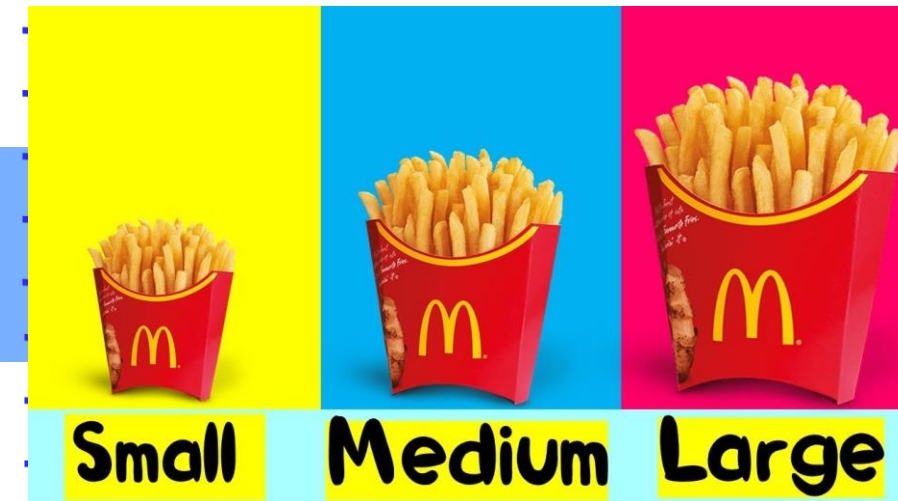
And now the problem is

- Nobody has done this before
- Higher education is highly "mimetic" and generally conservative
- So are SUs
- VUCA requires all sorts of skills and smarts that have not previously been necessary or even desirable
- Previous focus on incremental performance rather than innovation
- And everyone's understaffed and knackered and scared and cold and stressed and…

WONKHE
SUs

Change...

- The received wisdom says that change in our sector or organisations will come from elected officers.

- This is not automatic.

- Officers are wedded to the traditional system because they were successful in it, elections don't provide debate about it and because staff induct officers (not the other way around).

- This is a big lie we tell ourselves and the result is a deeply conservative environment.

WONKHE
SUs

Change...

- The received wisdom says that change in our sector or organisations will come from elected officers.

- This is not automatic.

- Officers are wedded to the traditional system because they were successful in it, elections don't provide debate about it and because staff induct officers (not the other way around).

- This is a big lie we tell ourselves and the result is a deeply conservative environment.

WONKHE
SUs

Why is innovation and R&D in the voluntary sector (almost) non existent?

Are the basic models now under intolerable pressure?

What if 20% of leadership time was on asking creative questions, generating ideas, piloting new approaches, challenging existing models etc?

WONKHE

1. The immersion model

- How far away are students living?
- How busy (and burdened) are students?
- Are they able to "deliver" the student experience in the same way?
- Are they able to benefit from the student experience in the same way
- How much should SUs play the ball where it lies, or resist to prevent a new normal?

What do we know about their lives and what they want from the uni experience?

WONKHE
SUs

What is a students' union?

Minimum viable product?

- Some students on committees

- Some clubs and societies

- Independent advocacy

- Reps across the university?

WONKHE
SUs

2. The functional model

- Defence – what is important, eye catching, promised, and emotionally invested in
- Offense
  - What is valuable from a DOT POV (saving money, understanding outcomes, improving outcomes)
  - Ownership roots
  - Strategy to kill and take over shadow voice operations – what has driven their creation?
  - Tackling opportunity overload

WONKHE
SUs

3. The advocacy model

- Assumes voice dept to support reps to improve education

- Assumes advice dept to support students when in crisis

- Assumes student leadership model based on FT functions and PT identities

- International students and academic misconduct – does the model work?

- Disabled students and reasonable adjustments – does the model work?

- Nursing students and interests – does the model work?

WONKHE
SUs

3. The advocacy model

- Assumes a series of professional functions. But:

Eg community of students from India

- Rep model assumes a kind of assertiveness
- Funding model assumes certainty in delivery
- Social model assumes homogeneity
- Advice model assumes crisis support is enough

What if you had two coordinators (or 5 student staff) who just did stuff for Indian students

Activities, advocacy, study skills, immigration , advice, voice work

WONKHE
SUs

4. The community model

- Assumes single, homogenous community with single points of focus and failure

- Village, town, city

- What is happening within the large (and free standing) communities?

- What if winners represent weighing of community size?

- Is it possible or wise to operate structures where one of the large communities can lose?

What if the sabbs were selected from a council of 100?

5. Student leadership model

- Individuals matter (rather than bodies, groups and functions)

- Elections matter (rather than selection by the elected)

- Self-care and quality the enemy of university size and complexity

- Laziness of "stick a sabb on it"

What if sabbs were not allowed to sit on university committees?

6. Representation model

- Mind reading is dead (or is it)
- Continuation, Completion and Progression
- Plus others (learning gain, confidence)
- Why are the numbers the way they are?
- Coverage at course level

What if everyone could be the course rep?

WONKHE
SUs

7. Capital model

- Size and diversity of courses
- Identity and social capital
  - Housing
  - Hobbies
  - Characteristics
  - Subject/Course?
- Intervening at course level but retaining student led approach?

What if your #1 metric was belonging?

(School plays)

WONKHE
SUs

8. Activities model

Clubs and societies dominate. But:

• Projects

• Initiatives

• Events

• Festivals

• Services

• Social enterprises

• Sprints

What if the "club" or "soc" was banned?

9. The commercial model

1. Each venue or outlet will be run and governed as a student led social enterprise

2. We will be run efficiently, to a high standard, and generate a healthy surplus that can be ploughed back into the union

3. We will employ a high number of student staff who are paid well and gain valuable experience at all levels of our business

4. We will be an exemplar in relation to safety, security, responsible retailing and ethical practices and purchasing

5. In our programming and product ranges we will seek to meet the widest possible range of students' needs, we will focus on minorities as well as majorities, and we will provide a platform for student talent to shine

10. The employment model

10-15 hours during reasonable hours is good. Rest is bad.

- Work experience

- Application

- Appraisal

- Supervision and management

What if the goal was full and good and educational employment?

11. The rights model

- Model assumes right t representation
- Assumes an intervention late on and benign actors
- TikTok
- Martin Lewis
- International development
- Minimums and entitlements
- Power

What if the metric was solving on-course annoyances?

12. The influencing model

- SUs as campaigning organisations v influencing organisations

- Evaluation v voice

- Representation v policy work

- Handling and influencing complexity

- Influencing the "whole" university

- Elected? Celebrity (overloaded) sabbs?

What if representation, campaigning or voice was abolished and the goal was influence?

WONKHE
SUs

13. The collaboration model

- NUS as a vehicle?

- Shared costs?

- Shared expertise and professionals as collab, more amateurs locally

- Delivery v admin costs?

What if you weren't allowed to employ non-student facing expertise?

nus
national union of **students**

14. The agenda model

- Stuck with "academic interests" as national metric

- Are there long term strategic goals attached to academic interests?

- How clear are academic interests a priority?

- Do they differ from student group to student group?

Does the union have a long term interests agenda?

15. The staffing model

- Labour market pressures continue

- Coordinators, pyramids and recruitment models

- Structures – commercial, membership services (advice, opportunities, voice)

- What if the structures were radically different – and involved (far) fewer career staff

- The Barista problem – but leadership distribution?

- Civil service v professionals in roles

What if there was a career staff freeze for 12 months

WONKHE
SUs

Basic model...

- Expert staff who have a general understanding of students
- Multidisciplinary staff who have an expert understanding of groups of students
- Schools? Countries?

Meet the Parents

The experience of students with children in further and higher education

national union of students

16. The Brand Model

- Why is there a single brand?
- Can students own it, play with it, use it?
- **What if there were multiple brands with multiple student leaders?**

17. The governance model

- Centrally run governance (sabbs + board) with clubs and societies

- Associations and governance in a group?

- Why does every function share performance management and governance assumptions?

- Are there potentially hundreds of opportunities to govern an SU

- Does every part need the same plan, same type of objectives, same cycle of decision making

- What if more students had more responsibility

What if the SU had to be broken up?

18. The resourcing model

- Membership fees for some of brands?

- Alumni staffing and support

- Legacy fundraising

- Location based activities and shared infrastructure

- Town centres?

What if you had to find money and re
from outside of uni grant?

WONKHE
SUs

Organisations of change

- Adaptive, nimble, agile organisations able to learn fast about environment around them, sense opportunities and mobilise resources to exploit them

- But organisations that just do that would be in perpetual turmoil, constantly reinventing themselves

- So as well as being adaptive, nimble and agile organisations need to have a sense of stability, continuity and purpose

- But a sense of stability that does not inhibit ability to adapt

- What does that optimum mix of stability and flux come from?

- **It comes from challenging conventional wisdom**

WONKHE
SUs

The Future

What's coming for HE and how should SUs respond?

JIM DICKINSON, WONKHE SUs

WONKHE
SUs