

Liberation communities: low engagement and ineffective structures - how can SUs best address this?

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2023 Liberation Group Research Project Overview

Why did we do this research?

- Networks provide an important space to support students who identify as part of a particular community or minority group

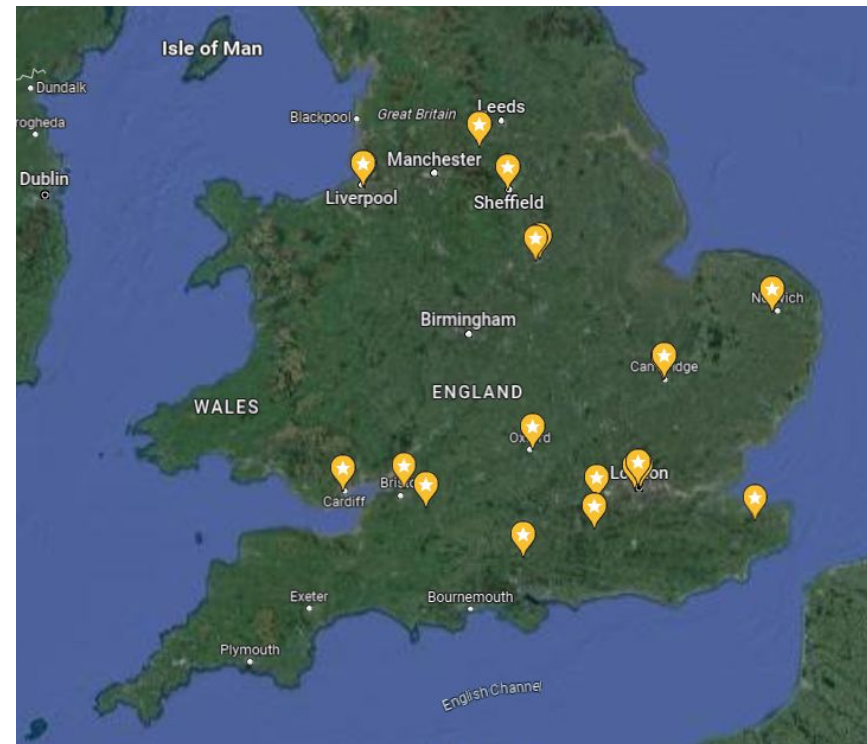
However...

- Our Networks were not functioning well
- We wanted to find out from other Unions how their Networks run and what the best practices in the sector are
- What we discovered, is that we are not alone with our Network challenges

NB: For the purpose of this research we refer to Liberation/ Community groups as Networks.

Overview of respondents

- 20 Students' Unions took part in this research
- Average number of Networks between respondents was 7.6*



*Excluding respondent who had 25-40 Networks as a result of including all Culture, Faith and Identity societies in their count.

Key findings:

- 55% of respondents named their Liberation Groups 'Networks' or a variation of
- Most common reported Networks:
 - LGBTQ+ Students' reported in 90% of responses
 - Disabled Students' reported in 85% of responses
 - International Students' reported in 75% of responses
 - BAME/ BIPOC Students' reported in 75% of responses
- Self-definition was a requirement to join Networks in 44% of respondents
- 55% of respondents reported to have Networks who focussed on community building and campaigning
 - Community-based Networks were more common in Campus-based Universities (67%)
- Lots of overlap between Networks, PTOs and Societies, with blurred remit and purpose

Funding and resources

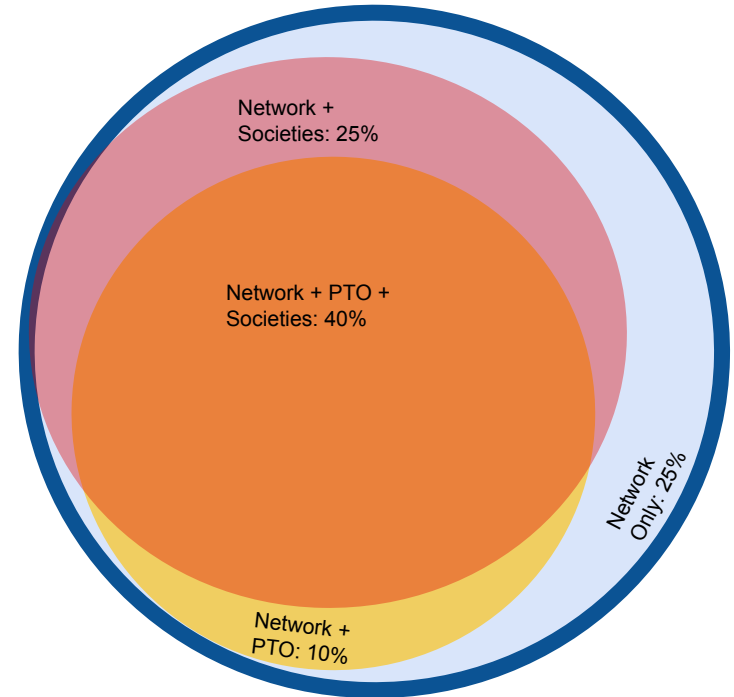
- 85% of respondents provide funding for their Networks
 - This came to £733 on average per Network
 - Many split funding equally between Networks, some have a central pot to apply to, others have a mixture of both
 - Applications for funding pots varied, with some lying at the decision of staff teams (e.g. Communities Team), whilst others had the funding decisions decided by a student council.
- 68% of respondents reported to have a designated staff resource for Networks
 - This was an average of 0.64 FTE
 - Most respondents who did not have designated staff resource did have staff who helped Networks.

How do the Networks overlap with societies and/or PTOs

- PTOs can play a great role in setting the direction of Networks, but can often come at the expense of competing manifesto priorities (and their degrees!)
 - Some Unions reported having a committee for their Networks who sit outside the PTO structure.
 - Others had PTOs as the Network lead with a committee alongside
 - Some only had PTOs and no committee.
- Similarly, we looked at the existence of societies who provide the same or similar spaces as the Networks. Having students 'choose' between either joining the society or Network is something that we are keen to avoid.
 - If Networks and Societies were to coexist, then how do we define these differences between them. Would Networks be best suited to be a space for students who self-define, and the societies then open to allies? Could the Networks exist as a campaigns spaces as opposed to a society providing a community space, or vice versa?

How do the Networks overlap with societies and/or PTOs

- 40% of respondents reported that their Networks had overlap with both societies and designated student officers (PTOs)
- 25% reported overlap with Societies individually
- 10% reported overlap with PTOs individually
- 25% had no overlap between Networks and societies, nor PTOs
- Quote from respondent:
 - 'When there is duplication [of Networks and societies], the Networks are generally less effective at fostering engagement as they are competing for engagement with a society'



Committee

- 60% of respondents have committees for their Networks.
- Of those who required committees, some had PTOs as the chair of their Networks, whilst others sat outside of the PTO space.
- One Union stated they embedded the election of Network leads into the society committee election timeline as this had better engagement from students than the main Union elections.

Network activities and broad evaluation

Community and campaigns based activities

- What sorts of activities?
- Where is there cross over?
- What insights can be drawn from this?

Evaluation

- What makes networks work well?
- What makes them not work well?
- What could be done differently?

Types of community activities



Organised by Network students (chair, lead, PTO, committee), supported by staff

- Club nights, craft, book clubs, gaming, coffee mornings, movie nights
- Online events
- Society meet and greets
- Liberation Ball, history month activities, panel talks, cultural celebrations

Some events have both campaigning and community building functions..



Types of campaign activities

- Decision making / feedback body meetings i.e. forum space
- Key dates such as awareness days/months
- Campus-based/local/national/international action
- Existing Union or Officer campaigns
- Lobbying meetings
- Consultation purpose of Networks



What does work well?

1. Staff resources
2. Connections and belonging
3. Clear definition and purpose
4. Change-making and campaigning
5. Collaboration and intersectionality
6. Payment of leads/focus groups



Full word cloud available, please email if you would like the word cloud

What doesn't work well?

1. Low engagement
2. Society overlap
3. Elected leads with other duties beyond the network
4. Committee issues
5. Lack of consistency or direction



This word cloud shows the themes from respondents

What could be done differently?

1. Strong support structure
2. Clear definition and purpose
3. Effective sign up/recruitment process
4. Effective comms to students



This word cloud shows the themes from respondents

Summary: where have we got to?

On the back of this research and implementing some of the best practices we learned, we have seen:

- A 930% increase in Network membership across the board this year
- 5/8 active Networks (as opposed to 1 the previous year)
- 43* events between the network in 2023-24

*some events were not uploaded to the website and not included in this number

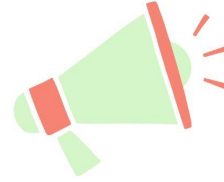
However...we still have sticking points

- Inactivity from Liberation group committee members
- Inactivity from PTOs driving campaigns relating to their respective Network
- Communication about events/ activities not reaching members
- Ineffective decision-making body space for liberation groups

Activity (15/20 mins)

- Each table will have a different conundrum that is often a sticking point for Unions/ Liberation groups:
 - i. Representation
 - ii. A consistent offering
 - iii. Remuneration
- You can float around any table you like - there's no pressure to go to all of them if they aren't relevant to your Union
- There are printouts of each conundrum on the table for you to refer to if needed
- This activity encourages peer-to-peer problem sharing and solving
- If you would like to add your own conundrum, please let us know!

Conundrum 1: Representation



Imagine a world where...

1. Part-time officers did not exist
2. Full-time officer whose remit includes liberation/ diversity/ community did not exist
3. No full-time officer roles existed

With each of these scenarios in mind...

How would you reimagine student representation in regard to liberation empowerment?

From your experience...

Would you restructure your liberation communities/ networks. How?

How would you ensure representation on University committees?

How would you ensure that Union-led liberation projects and campaigns are effective and representative of the student body?

Conundrum 2: A consistent offering

Picture this...

1. You have a liberation network with a large student base who value the opportunity to spend time together and share their experiences, however the committee/ PTO are inactive and not communicating with the SU.
2. The liberation committee has put on loads of events, but are now becoming demotivated as no one is showing up.
3. Your Network was active previously, however you are now struggling to elect a committee as no one wants to put themselves forward for a role.

Drawing from your experience...

What could you do to reengage students in the Network (either committee, students or electing committee members)?

How could you address the lack of attendance at events?

How do you ensure that members of Networks are provided with a community despite challenges with committees?

Conundrum 3: Remuneration



*Funding is limited, so you can only pick **one** option, what would you do and why?*

Would you rather...

1. Pay a student staff to organise liberation activities (across all groups)
2. Change the job description of a full-time officer role to include the organisation of liberation activities and also provide representation
3. Pay an elected Liberation group committee member(s) to run liberation activities for their specific group

With this in mind...

How would you ensure representation in regard to liberation in University committees with the option you have chosen?

Where you elect/ hire, how do you ensure value for money?
(E.g. performance management)

Feedback

- Please can one person from each table you sat at feedback what has been written on your flipchart paper
- If you would like to elaborate on a point you raised, please feel free to
- If there are any points you have further questions about, please raise them!

Feel free to get in touch!

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