

Understanding the SU's key relationships: The Cadogan Matrices.



Peter Cadogan

PETER CADOGAN, GENERAL MANAGER AT UWESU URGES STUDENTS' UNIONS TO LOOK TO THE FUTURE AND REASSESS THEIR PRIORITIES (RE-PRINTED FROM AGENDA 63).

In this article, I shall invite you to consider change. The world of students' unions has changed, is changing and will continue to change. I am going to attempt to analyse that change process and see what that analysis may indicate about the future.

I am sure you will be familiar with the way in which the student experience has changed over time. Once it was the norm to leave school, travel away to live in a hall of residence, collect the grant cheque, read for a degree in a defined discipline and pass the exams in the knowledge that a 'graduate job' was waiting. I do not think I need to dwell upon the difference between that experience and the experience today.

organisations which once represented students have become major business operations and service providers

In that same time frame, as the experience of successive student generations has changed, so has the nature of the unions of those students. Organisations, the focus of which was once the representation of their members, have transformed into major business operations the focus of which is that of service provision.

While the direction of that change over time has been consistent, there is clear evidence of differential responses union to union. I have analysed that process by looking at students' unions in terms of the perception of their three key stakeholders:

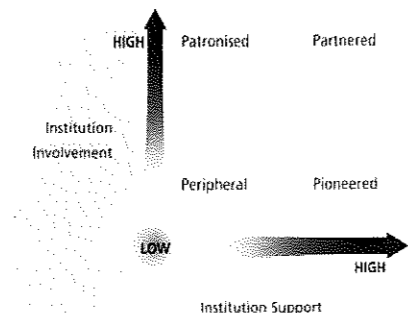
**their members
their parent institutions
their staff**

Let us firstly consider the perception of the parent institutions by posing the question, 'why do parent institutions fund students' unions to the level that they do?'

My suggested answer is that they do so in terms of their perception of the benefit and/or disbenefit to the institution which follows from the activities of the students' union. I would further contend that it is this perception of either benefit or disbenefit that is key to the relationship stance that an institution takes to its students' union. Thus

some institutions will adopt an overseeing stance with a view to minimising perceived disbenefit.

I have employed a matrix to illustrate the interaction between two variables, the first being the extent to which the parent institution involves itself in the affairs of the students' union and the second, the extent to which the parent institution 'supports' the activities of its students' union.



Thus we can identify four categories of students' union based on the relationship stance of their parent institution.

Firstly, those students' unions which are 'peripheral'. In such cases the institution provides little support and has little interest to be involved, as it views the students' union as marginal to its purpose.

Secondly, there are those students' unions which are 'patronised'. In these cases, the institution takes a stance of minimising the perceived disbenefits and requires involvement out of all proportion to any support.

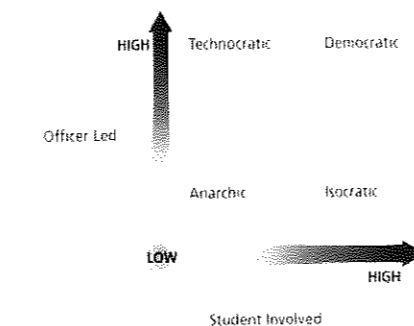
Thirdly, there are those students' unions which are 'pioneered'. The institution provides support but distances itself on the basis that the students' union fulfils a useful role but if it has problems it's down to them.

Finally, there are those students' unions which are 'partnered'. In such cases, the institution views the students' union as key in terms of the institutions strategic intent. In such cases, the interaction between the students' union and the institution produces a positive force for development.

It is my contention that there exists an inherent tension between parent institutions and students' unions. The result of that tension is that the relationship stance of the parent institution changes over time, and hence the position of any given students' union within the matrix is subject to movement. I will return to this later.

Now let us look at the relationships of students' unions to their members. Here

again, I have employed a matrix to investigate the interaction between two variables, namely the extent to which a union is 'officer-led' and/or the extent to which it is 'student involved'.



Thus we can identify four categories of students' union based on the perception of their members.

Firstly, those students' unions which are perceived by their members as anarchic. In such cases, the members perceive the union to be of little relevance to their needs and hence there is little evidence of member involvement. Also in such cases, there is an absence of leadership, of the officers providing the organisation with a sense of purpose.

Secondly, there are those unions which are perceived by their members as 'technocratic'. These are unions where the elected leaders are characterised by their knowledge of the system and their distance from the electorate. These unions are led in the sense that their officers exhibit purpose but show a low level of member involvement as the purpose pursued fails to reflect the needs of the membership.

Thirdly, there are those unions which are viewed by their members as organisations in which they have the opportunity to pursue that which is of relevance to them as an individual and in that sense are 'isocratic'. In such unions there is a high level of involvement but little leadership in terms of the organisation having a central sense of purpose.

'democratic' unions show high levels of membership participation and a powerful sense of purpose

Finally, there are those unions to which I will ascribe the emotive term 'democratic'. In such unions, the relationship between the leaders and the led is such as to produce organisations which exhibit a high level of member involvement and a powerful sense of purpose.

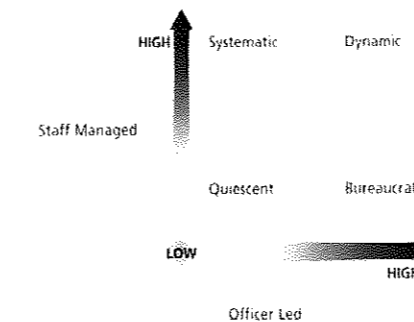
Understanding the SU's key relationships: The Cadogan Matrices.

Peter Cadogan's article was originally printed in Agenda 63, September 1998

I would suggest that the process of union governance is such that the relationship stance of the membership changes over time and hence the position of any given students' union within this matrix is again subject to movement.

Thirdly, let us look at the relationship of the students' union to the third key stakeholder: their staff.

Again, I've employed a matrix to illustrate the inter-relationship between two variables, the first being the extent to which a union is 'officer-led' and the second being the extent to which the union is 'staff-managed'.



Thus we can identify four categories of students' unions based upon the perceptions of their staff.

Firstly, those students' unions which are perceived as 'quiescent'. In such unions, the staff perceive the union as being a convenient vehicle for their employment. The staff have no sense of the purpose of a students' union and with little or no officer leadership, such unions will exhibit little purpose.

Secondly, those unions that, for want of a better expression, I have classified as 'systematic'. In such unions the staff perceive the union as equivalent to that of any other company or organisation. Extremely high standards of management proactivity may be visible. There may be evidence of real purpose, but it will not necessarily be the sense of purpose with which the officers identify.

Thirdly, there is the category of union that I have designated as 'bureaucratic'. In such unions, the staff perceive that the agenda is wholly set and controlled by the elected officers. The extent to which that agenda is achieved however, is constrained by the staff who may lack any sense of shared purpose and who are likely to exhibit comparatively low levels of skill and application.

Finally, there is that category of unions which are perceived by staff as being 'dynamic'. In such unions, staff perceive the leadership of the officers from a positive and informed perspective and a combination of officer

there exists an inevitable tension between 'staff management' and 'officer leadership'

leadership and staff skill and commitment produces a shared sense of purpose and positive forces for development.

As when we looked at the relationship with the parent institution, it is my contention that there exists an inevitable tension between 'staff management' and 'officer leadership'. As a result, the balance in the inter-relationship between these two variables is subject to fluctuation and hence the position of any given students' union is again subject to movement.

So, where have we got to?

We have analysed students' unions in terms of a series of interacting variables relating to their institutions, their members and their staff. I am sure that many of you are pondering where it is that your own union may fit in the matrices. Some of you may be thinking that the relationships are more complex than can be described by such a method. Indeed, they are. What I have produced is a series of what sociologists would describe as 'ideal types'. They are not ideal in the sense of preferred but in the sense that as constructs they are not real. Nevertheless, they do, I suggest, provide a framework in which to analyse students' unions on a comparative basis.

I am uncertain if it is controversial to suggest that those unions which will be viewed as successful in the future will be the ones which are perceived as 'democratic' by their members, 'dynamic' by their staff and which work in 'partnership' with their institutions.

I am going to assume that it is to this model that unions aspire and I am now going to look at what indications will increasingly reflect the characteristics of this model.

As indicated previously, the position of any given union in each of the matrices is subject to movement. Is it possible therefore to identify any trends in those movements? Let us take each matrix in turn.

In terms of the relationship stance of the parent institution the evidence is entirely mixed. The impact of the students being in a contractual relationship with the institution has resulted in institutions reviewing their relationship with their students' unions in contrasting ways.

Some institutions are responding by taking an increasingly pioneering stance: "We will concentrate on the core academic provision. The students' union can pioneer in other areas of activity outside of the central contract". Other institutions are reacting by taking an increasingly patronising stance: "We may be liable in the contract for the

quality of provision across the board therefore we must increasingly control that which the students' union is involved in providing".

In terms of competition between institutions for students, there is again evidence of a divergence in reaction. Some institutions, recognising the importance of the students' union to their marketing proposition, increasingly work in partnership with their students' union. Other institutions have taken an increasingly patronising stance: "We need greater control over the students' union provision given its importance to our recruitment and retention of students". Other institutions have still not woken up to the importance of the students' union to their marketing and continue to take a peripheral stance. A mixed picture with no obvious trend towards partnership. In terms of the perception of the members of students' unions it would appear however that there is a consistency in the trend: namely that of decreasing member involvement.

Earlier, we identified that the focus of students' unions had changed from representation to service provision. That, I would suggest, has resulted in declining membership involvement for three reasons:

Firstly, while the scale of services provided has increased, the scope of these services is reflecting the needs of a decreasing proportion of the membership. Already less than half of all students conform to a model of full-time student on a first degree course. Over half the students in Higher Education can currently be defined as 'mature' at entry. Postgraduates now constitute 15% of the total student population. Modulation is likely to make the distinction between full-time and part-time students increasingly arbitrary. Yet students' union services continue to be geared to the needs of full time undergraduates between the ages of 18-23. Moreover, full-time undergraduates aged 18-23 with an interest in sport, politics, entertainment and alcohol. People do not tend to involve themselves in organisations that do little for them!

Secondly, the growth in service provision has resulted in a change in the focus of elected officers. The priority placed on overseeing the management of services has distanced the elected from the electors. (I once saw a sign on a President's office door 'Notice to students: The role of the President is extremely time-consuming - if you must see me then please make an appointment with my PA') If the head of an academic department did the same, how would they be viewed by students in that department? People do not tend to involve themselves in organisations where they feel distanced from the leadership.

Understanding the SU's key relationships: The Cadogan Matrices.

Thirdly, the focus on service provision changes student perception of the students' union. The more the students' union is perceived as a supplier of services, the more the student defines their relationship to the union in terms of that of a customer. The less students define their relationship to the union as that of member, the less they will involve themselves in the union as an organisation. (I am sure it does not help to use the same term i.e. students' union to designate both a building and an organisation - the students' union is the organisation.) As such, the trend is away from the democratic model.

As to the perception of the staff of students' union, evidence of any trend is mixed. What seems to be the case is that many unions tend to arc backwards and forwards in terms of the balance between officer-led and staff-managed, fluctuating first in one way and then the other. So there is no clear trend towards the 'dynamic' model.

The trends do not evidence therefore that an increasing number of unions will come to be perceived as democratic by the members, dynamic by the staff and in partnership with the institution. So, if that is the model to which students' unions aspire, what changes can they make to influence the trend?

By the way of conclusion, I would like to put to you a key change that the analysis suggests to me. That change is to refocus students' unions on their representational tradition. Why then would that be beneficial?

Firstly, it would help to clarify the role relationship between the elected officer and employed staff and hence lead to many

more unions where there exists a real sense of shared purpose.

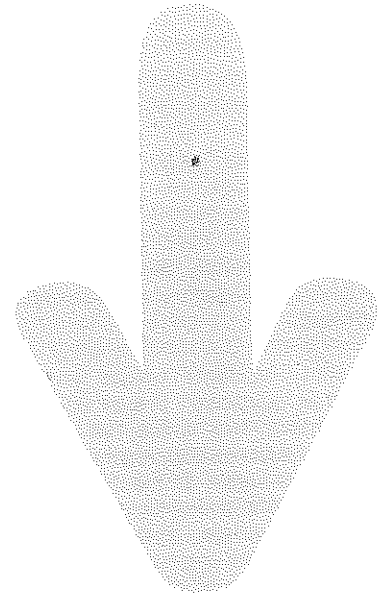
Secondly, it would lead to more institutions adopting a partnership stance to their students' union. On the face of it, enhancing the representative function could lead to a students' union being perceived by its parent institution as an adversary. However, the marketing needs and contract requirements of an institution will be such that a strong union, truly representative of the members' views, will be a major benefit to institutions.

For a students' union to effect such a change is depending on no one else. It simply takes you, the leaders, to prioritise the representative function in terms of the amount of your time and the unions resources you choose to devote to the representation of the membership.

The third and greatest benefit to be derived is in terms of membership perception. For students, there is to a large extent, a substitute supplier for most students' union services. The one thing that a student cannot get anywhere else is the collective and individual representation made possible from being a member of a students' union. Moreover, the provision of representation does not discriminate in favour of the traditional student. No matter how diversified the student population, representation brings with it a shared need and provides shared benefit. Refocusing on representation brings with it the potential of generating a virtuous circle whereby students' unions become more relevant to their members, generating increased involvement, making for a stronger union able to better represent its members

leading to it becoming even more relevant to the members and so on.

At the beginning of the article, I referred to the way in which the student experience has changed over time and, in that same time frame, how students' unions have changed. Given that students' unions exist to meet the needs of their members, you would assume that the change in students' unions have resulted from the changing needs of the members of those unions as their experience as students changed over time. I would invite you to ponder the extent to which that has been the case and in doing so, the degree to which students' unions have been agents of change rather than merely reactors to change. Change will characterise the future as it has the past. The question I invite you to address is the extent to which the change will be initiated by students' unions.



COMMENT ON APPLICATION OF CADOGAN MATRICES

"Teesside has been using the Cadogan 'institutional relationships' matrix during our Sabbatical Training for the last couple of years. Sabbatical Officers and Managers have used the model as a 'health check' on the current state of our relationship with our parent institution and to act as a reminder of how things can turn sour if we forget to re-evaluate this on a regular basis. 2nd year Sabbs in particular are able to recognise the characteristics of relationship that can exist and if anything the model has made us even more driven to try to establish a fully 'partnered' relationship and this is our ultimate goal. The model helps reinforce in everyone whether Sabbs or Managers that we have a collective responsibility to nurture our relationships at all levels and at all times. As a Students' Union we must take the lead in this and if what we do is crap then we will not deserve to be treated as a valued partner...in that sense the ball is, so to speak, very much in our court"



Martyn Williams

Martyn Williams is the General Manager at the University of Teesside Students' Union.