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# Barriers to student engagement in clubs and societies: a social capital perspective

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## Abstract

*In 2018/19, John Moores Students' Union embarked on a 'ground clearing' exercise to determine the barriers students face when engaging, or trying to engage, with a student-led sports club or society. An online survey to students revealed several barriers: difficulty in 'fitting in', costs, time, geography, and communication. This paper reflects on the outcomes of the survey and offers an interpretive lens based on the ideas of social capital, as espoused by Pierre Bourdieu and Robert D. Putnam.*

## Keywords

students' unions; student engagement; social capital; sports clubs; societies

## Introduction

Students' unions (SUs), guilds or associations have a long history and, today, over 600 exist in various guises in universities and further education colleges in the UK. SUs traditionally provide support and advocacy on academic and welfare issues – representing students both individually and collectively. Whilst unions differ in size, organisation and structure they share similar characteristics: they organise, aggregate and intermediate student interests, provide services (such as bars and shops), and organise or support student-led social activities (Brooks et al., 2014; Day, 2012; Klemenčič, 2012).

There has been growing interest in exploring the role of SUs in the UK and, though the literature is sparse, this has tended to focus on the representative functions of SUs. For instance, Brooks et al. (2015) administered a survey to SU officers and conducted focus groups within ten case study HE institutions. The study set out to determine how SU roles were changing in an increasingly marketised landscape. Representing students (n=112), providing services (59), and improving the student experience (51) featured highly in the 'relative importance of roles carried out by students' unions'. These compared to running social events (21) and running student societies (19). Nevertheless, whilst ranked lower, some events and societies can act as important points of induction or responsibility and, therefore, this enculturation may nudge some students towards a representative role. In short, engagement in societies should not be understated. Guan et al.'s (2016) 'functional categorisation' of SUs determined that – relative to the other aspects of SU operations - clubs and societies help engender a community spirit via coherent social networks. Brooks et al. (2016) posited that SUs' focus on commercial activities, whilst important for revenue generation and ensuring financial stability, was secondary to the more important measure of 'student satisfaction' resulting in much closer working ties with institutions in order to acknowledge SUs' value in 'improving the quality of the student experience' (p. 478).

This paper focuses on the clubs, societies and teams supported by John Moores Students' Union (JMSU) and reflects on data collected to determine the motivations and barriers students at LJMU face when engaging, or trying to engage, with these extracurricular activities. It also offers an interpretive lens based on the ideas of social capital as espoused by Pierre Bourdieu and Robert D. Putnam.

## John Moores Students' Union

As detailed in Webster and Wilkie's (2017) history of LJMU, the first official record for a students' union within any of the University's constituent colleges dates back to 1936, at Liverpool Art College. Holistic and collective student representation began to be embedded with the formation of Liverpool Polytechnic in 1970, which was stimulated by the Department of Education Circular 7/70 that stated that there should be a union whose representatives should be consulted on matters of 'proper concern' (Day, 2012: 34). This single SU body – what eventually became Liverpool Polytechnic Student Union (LPSU) - was affiliated to the National Union of Students (NUS) and engaged in many national campaigns throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1992, following the creation of John Moores University, LPSU became Liverpool Students' Union (LiverpoolSU) and student demand led to the appointment of an assistant general manager of membership services in 1996 (Webster and Wilkie, 2017). Today, the Union exists as JMSU and all students (both undergraduate and postgraduate) automatically become members. JMSU is a democratic, student-

led entity with charitable status and has four elected full-time sabbatical officers. JMSU clubs, teams and societies are supported by the Vice President (VP) Activities who, at the start of 2019/20, pledged to:

o Enhance communication and liaison between JMSU and clubs by creating clear budget plans and to work towards common objectives;

o Improve inclusivity [in clubs and societies] for all by working with Equality Reps, and having themed months; and

o Create more work placements and internships by using more clubs and societies as clients and to increase club membership by highlighting the employability skills developed.

The clubs, societies and teams supported by JMSU align with the Union's broad mission of "connecting [students with] each other and the world around them", thus ensuring that there are "happy, confident students" (JMSU, 2017). Additionally, the mission and vision connects strongly with the NUS's (2016) objective of ensuring that wellbeing and welfare are central to the student experience and, through engagement with societies, clubs and sports teams, a belief that students acquire the confidence to engage in civic life – equipping them with "positive values, skills and knowledge [to] enable them to develop leadership skills, participate in their communities and create social change" (p. 8).



*JMSU Freshers Fair 2019*

At the start of 2019/20, JMSU offered ample opportunity for social integration and personal development as over 100 societies and sports teams and clubs were represented at the Freshers Fair. As detailed in Appendix A, the societies cater for a range of different tastes, some are:

o aligned to academic study (e.g. Biology, Law, Psychology or Sociology);

o politically focused (e.g. Labour Students);

o recreational (e.g. Poker, Table Top Gaming, Yoga);

o religious or spiritual in nature (Catholic, Islamic);

o reflective of cultural interests (e.g. Anime, Book, Film);

o supportive to specific students (e.g. International, Postgraduate); or

o arenas for expression for 'liberation groups' (e.g. LGBTQ+, Disabled Students).

Further, there are opportunities for LJMU students to engage in activities (e.g. LJMU Student Radio) or in campaigns and charities (e.g. LJMU CATS [cancer awareness in teenagers], LJMU Student Minds [student mental health]).

Alongside these societies and initiatives, there are many sports teams and clubs – championing both traditional (e.g. football [soccer], cricket, rugby union) and minority interest sports (e.g. jiu-jitsu, Gaelic football, rowing). Many of the sports clubs are eligible to compete in BUCS (British Universities and Colleges Sports) team leagues, interclub or intramural competitions, thus injecting an added purpose for the student. In addition to being part of a team, students engaging in sports have opportunities to develop as many of the clubs provide both technical coaching, and strength and conditioning ahead of match days or tournaments. Many of the teams travel within the region and around the country, and there have been

opportunities to participate in tours and competitions aboard. For instance, LJMU Netball and Cricket were selected to go on a fully funded sports tour to Sri Lanka in 2018, providing valuable experience to 22 students. Each year, Liverpool Varsity – a sports competition that has been running since 1993 – pits LJMU students against the students of University of Liverpool.

A Refreshers Fair is organised at the start of the second semester (January), offering an additional opportunity for students to sign up to clubs and societies.

JMSU does not have its own 'union building' (i.e. offering its own services such as a bar, shop or separate, large social space): in 2020/21 the Union will co-locate, with other student-facing LJMU services, into a new facility in the heart of Liverpool (The Student Life Building). As Brooks et al. (2016) noted in their study of ten UK HE institutions, the nature and location of a students' union building was considered to have a direct impact on the extent to which the wider student body engaged (or otherwise) with the SU.

### LJMU students
Clubs and societies supported by JMSU have to appeal to a wide variety of students. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA) returns for 2017/18 indicate that 23,230 students were enrolled at LJMU, including 10,560 first years (45.5 per cent), and 1,635 international students (7.0 per cent). Most are 20 years and under (n=11,960, 51.5 per cent). Relative to other protected characteristics, 2,255 students (9.7 per cent) have a known disability, and 2,505 students (10.8 per cent) identify as BAME (black Asian or minority ethnic) or 'other'. Another notable feature of the University's intake is reflected in the number of white students from 'low participation neighbourhoods' (large pockets of Merseyside are in the lowest HE

participation areas). LJMU is second in the table among universities in England in the number of acceptances of white students from low participation neighbourhoods (Atherton and Mazhari, 2019). In line with national data, a significant proportion of LJMU's students are commuters and, therefore, time poor: typically, over 25 per cent of the student intake live 'at home' at similar post-1992 institutions (Thomas and Jones, 2017: 19). The University has also supported care leavers' transition to HE in the establishment of a 'care leavers' covenant in 2018/19 (LJMU, 2018).

LJMU is not a campus-based institution and students are located at four main areas. Three are dotted around the city centre (Mount Pleasant, Tithebarn Street and Byrom Street) and the fourth (IM Marsh) is situated four miles to the south of the city.

### Barriers to participation in SU clubs and societies
Research on SU clubs and societies in the UK is sparse. This is surprising given that, at the beginning of each academic year, those enrolling to UK universities are advised to make the most of their university experience by signing up to a student-led club or society (Gibbons, 2016; Mock, 2019). Further, as part of the high profile 'What Works?' programme on student engagement and belonging in UK HE, the need to cultivate spaces for students to be able to develop their friendship network was highly recommended: in this regard, the value of student-led clubs and societies featured prominently in two of the programme's projects (Thomas, 2012).

Relative to the barriers in engagement in UK SU-supported societies and sports clubs it is worthwhile noting recent studies and reports. In a project funded by the UK Council for International Student Affairs (UKCISA), Lincoln University Students' Union (LUSU) conducted research into how

international students engage with SU services and opportunities (Lilley and Barnes, 2017). Focus group data, comprising 21 international/EU students, and online survey responses (n=26) revealed several factors that impeded participation in SU sports and societies. These were identified as: time, cultural differences, difficulties in making friends, not having appropriate information, and cost of participation. However, the authors stressed, "Historically, international students [had] shown little engagement with services offered by the SU" (p. 36): according to LUSU's management system, of those international students enrolled in 2015/16, just 12 per cent were members of a sports team or society.

Glazzard (2017) offered a student perspective and reflected on the barriers to SU participation for working class students at a Russell Group university. This paper was distilled from a wider study on widening participation at the university, and focused on the experience of five UK domiciled students (reflecting differing ethnic backgrounds, disabilities, and ages). Students highlighted cost, time, location, convenience and safety as barriers to engagement in SU activities (representative roles and activities and well as in student-led sports and societies).

In a report for the NUS, Milani and Shotton (2018) gave an overview of the barriers to participation in SU sports clubs and presented methods and practices applied to overcome these obstacles. In particular, the report noted the barriers relative to 'liberation groups' (BAME, disabled, LGBTQ+ and women students). Issues of racism, 'the lad culture', inaccessibility, and homophobia, were cited as issues that prohibited participation.

## Social capital

In Glazzard's (2017) qualitative study (cited above), the application of Bourdieu's (1986) notion of capital ('social capital or capital of social relationships') was applied as a lens to help illuminate the cultural and social dimensions of the experience of working class students. This paper draws on the same framework, and illuminates the findings relative to the Putnam's (2000) notion of social capital.

In explaining 'habitus', Bourdieu (1977; 1986) posits that an individual's perceptions, feelings and actions are informed by socially internalised dispositions. Responses to the stimuli are generated by the quality of engagement in group culture, the self, and social institutions (e.g. of the family and school). As the dispositions are played out, habitus of the individual or group is strengthened, which is reproduced and evolves through the interplay of an individual's subconscious with the social arenas they encounter (Reay, 2004). These social arenas (such as a university or SU club/society), or 'fields', are imbued with a set of rules that reflect the 'group habitus'. Thus, the self-actualisation (or otherwise) of people within the field is dependent on the type of habitus they have and the capital that it carries. Capital is simply the usable resource and power a person has, which Bourdieu (1986) classifies as 'economic', 'cultural' and 'social' (p. 16). Economic capital refers to monetary resources; cultural capital may encompass intellect, the way a person acts or behaves in a given situation, gestures, how one dresses, etc.; and social capital encompasses friends and colleagues acquired through "a durable network of more or less institutionalised relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition" (p. 21). Both cultural and social capital can – "in certain conditions" (p. 16) be converted into economic capital, as Bourdieu (1990) suggests that cultural capital allows

individuals to move like 'fish in water' through an awareness of the field they are in. Conversely, as Reay et al. (2009) advise, those without access to particular types of capital may experience difficulties transitioning through certain social and institutional situations.

To Putnam (2000), social capital is rooted in the value of social networks – as 'a social glue': active participation in voluntary entities (such as clubs and societies) can lead to well-functioning communities. Social trust, co-operation and reciprocity are at the heart of these communities, therefore embedding the conditions that increase the likelihood of individuals engaging for mutual benefit (see also Field and Spence, 2000), as Putnam asserts:

> [social capital represents] *connections among individuals – social networks and norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them* (p. 19)… *trustworthiness lubricates social life. Frequent interaction among a diverse set of people tends to produce a norm of generalised reciprocity* (p. 21).

Putnam refers to 'linkages' as a means of connecting individuals or groups further up (or lower down) the social hierarchy. 'Bonding' and 'bridging' are also key tenets of his thinking. Bonds are shaped from a sense of common identity, such as those formed in the family or community: bridges extend beyond a shared identity. Networks with a homogenous membership and limited connection to the outside world represent networks that are high in bonding, and conditioned to building 'particular trust'. Networks with heterogeneous membership are high in bridging social capital and relatively efficient in building 'social trust'. As Putnam asserts, social networks must be amenable to cutting across social divides, and to be open in order to have "positive externalities for society" (pp. 22-23). On

this, there is a 'darker side' to bonding social capital, which may discourage the formation of bridging social capital and vice versa. For instance, this is evident in some UK university sports clubs where bonding is heightened by the practice of 'hazing', or initiation ceremonies, whereby membership and acceptance into a group may be represented by rituals such as excessive drinking in a short period of time, ritualised nudity, task performance ('dares') or physical/psychological abuse (Groves et al., 2011; Milani and Shotton, 2018).

## Methodology

This study must be viewed in context. It was conceived as a very quick 'ground clearing' exercise to determine the barriers students faced when trying to join, or engage with, a JMSU-supported club or society. This was largely in recognition of the fatigue learners face when being requested to respond to numerous questionnaires and surveys. Therefore, with this in mind, an online survey – mostly resembling a quick poll to gauge ideas and thoughts – was designed. The survey was promoted at the end of November 2018 and closed in early January 2019; it was largely promoted via JMSU's social media channels (Twitter and Facebook). It was thought that releasing the survey about eight weeks into the new academic year was long enough for students (particularly those who were new, or had just joined a club or society) to have an informed opinion. Operationally, it was also important that JMSU received the information in time to make any necessary adjustments to plans and policies in the second semester and beyond. Accordingly, owing to the constrained timescale, the survey was not piloted. As another methodological consideration, unlike several surveys that are aimed at students, no rewards or incentives were offered. Consequently, just 162 students (about 0.7

per cent of the entire LJMU student intake) responded.  Nevertheless, though statistically small, each of the levels were represented, (Table 1):

| Level | Description | % |
|-------|-------------|---|
| Level 3 | Foundation | 2 |
| Level 4 | UG Year 1 | 22 |
| Level 5 | UG Year 2 | 33 |
| Level 6 | UG Year 3 | 30 |
| Level 6 | UG Year 4 | 2 |
| Level 7 | PG Taught | 9 |
| PhD | PG Research | 2 |

*Table 1: Breakdown of respondents by level*

The online survey was designed to be relatively quick to complete.  It included two icebreaker questions:

o The reasons for joining a club or society
o The benefits of being part of a club or society

And questions on the barriers, which were focused on:

o The reasons why students choose not to join a club or society
o Why students opt to leave a club or society

In 2018/19, JMSU introduced new Equality Reps (e.g. BAME, LGBTQ+, Womens, Postgraduate, and International), so a question on inclusivity was included (to agree or disagreeing – on a five-point scale – whether they thought "JMSU clubs and societies are inclusive and welcoming to all students").  The survey did offer respondents an opportunity to offer qualitative feedback in free-text boxes, and these comments are referenced in this paper.

When reading this paper, there is an emphasis on the 'negative' themes – the barriers to student engagement, and this reflects the bias in the survey.  This should not downplay the many positive outcomes that many of the JMSU clubs and societies have produced: overall, they play an important part in the University and in the

lives of many.  For instance, one person indicated, 'I don't know what I would've done without it'.  On this comment alone, and another limitation of the study, we do not know the context of that, seemingly, very powerful personal statement.  LJMU, like many other universities, has absorbed many social histories, thus Glazzard's (2017) qualitative study that took account of students' personal backgrounds offers a good template for any future studies.  This paper does not determine the personal backgrounds of the students, the mode of their study, nor reference any demographic data.

The study also did not consider the type of engagement or involvement.  For instance, whether the students had engaged in a club or society over a period, or whether their experience was a 'one-off' encounter.  As evident in the comments, sports clubs and teams can have quite distinct cultures when compared to societies, but this was not differentiated in the survey.  Further, the survey did not consider whether students had engaged in more than one club or society and, therefore, offer an opportunity for comparability.

Finally, and with hindsight, it would have been useful to probe further students' engagement with clubs or societies prior to coming to university, whether this had influenced their choice, or whether they were involved in any other extracurricular activities not supported by LJMU/JMSU. In short, the survey design represented something of a compromise, directed by a desire to produce a tool that was not onerous to complete, and which offered a quick turnaround of results.  Overall, the exercise is best viewed as a pilot study in its own right and, in spite of the methodological limitations, still offers some invaluable insights in an area of student activity that has been under-researched.

## Findings

*Everything we do is focused on making sure all our members have opportunities to belong to a vibrant, inclusive, supportive community of LJMU students* (JMSU, 2017).

Figure 1: Reasons for joining a club or society (Base: 120 respondents, with multiple responses)

| Reason | Responses |
|---|---|
| To meet people/make friends | 101 |
| To continue with a sport/activity I've previously… | 72 |
| Something to do whilst at Uni | 60 |
| Social events with other club/society members | 49 |
| Relevant to my course/subject | 32 |
| To try out a new sport/activity | 29 |
| Looks good on my CV | 23 |
| Friends joined/knew someone in the club or… | 20 |
| Other (Please specify) | 1 |
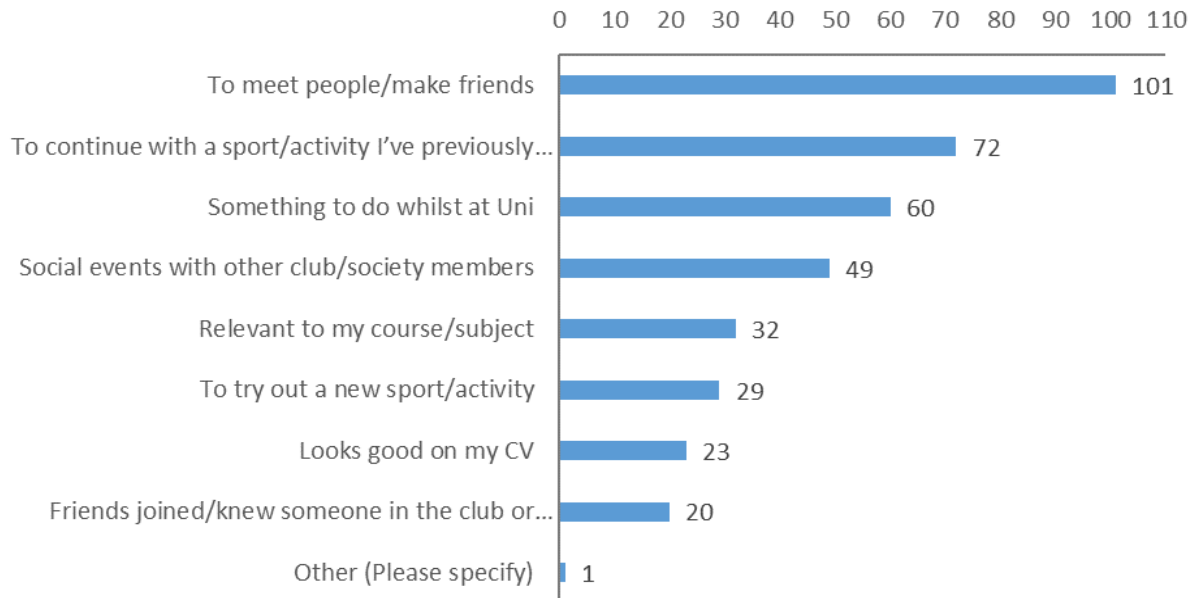
Figure 2: Impact of joining a club or society (Base: 94 respondents)

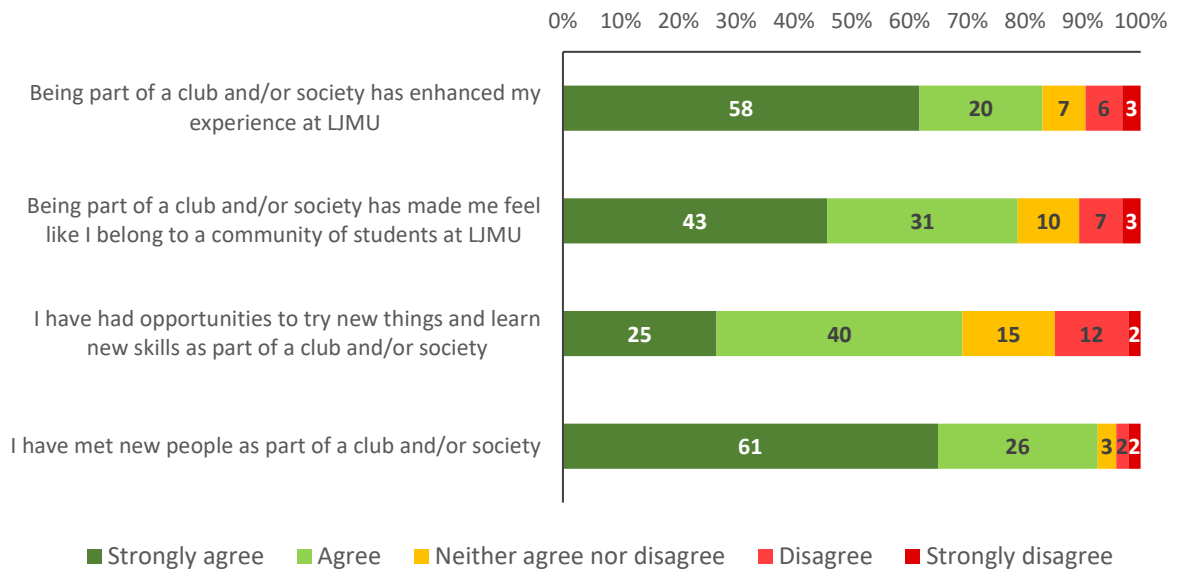| Statement | Strongly agree | Agree | Neither agree nor disagree | Disagree | Strongly disagree |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Being part of a club and/or society has enhanced my experience at LJMU | 58 | 20 | 7 | 6 | 3 |
| Being part of a club and/or society has made me feel like I belong to a community of students at LJMU | 43 | 31 | 10 | 7 | 3 |
| I have had opportunities to try new things and learn new skills as part of a club and/or society | 25 | 40 | 15 | 12 | 2 |
| I have met new people as part of a club and/or society | 61 | 26 | 3 | 2 | 2 |

Figure 3: Reasons why students chose not to join a club or society (Base 108 respondents, with multiple responses)

| Reason | Value |
|---|---|
| Lack of time to participate | 58 |
| Cost | 29 |
| Wasn't sure what to expect | 25 |
| Joined an alternative club or society | 18 |
| Other (Please specify) | 18 |
| Activities didn't seem inclusive | 12 |
| Didn't think I would make friends/meet people | 11 |
| Didn't think I would like the type of social… | 8 |
| Didn't seem relevant to my course/subject | 3 |
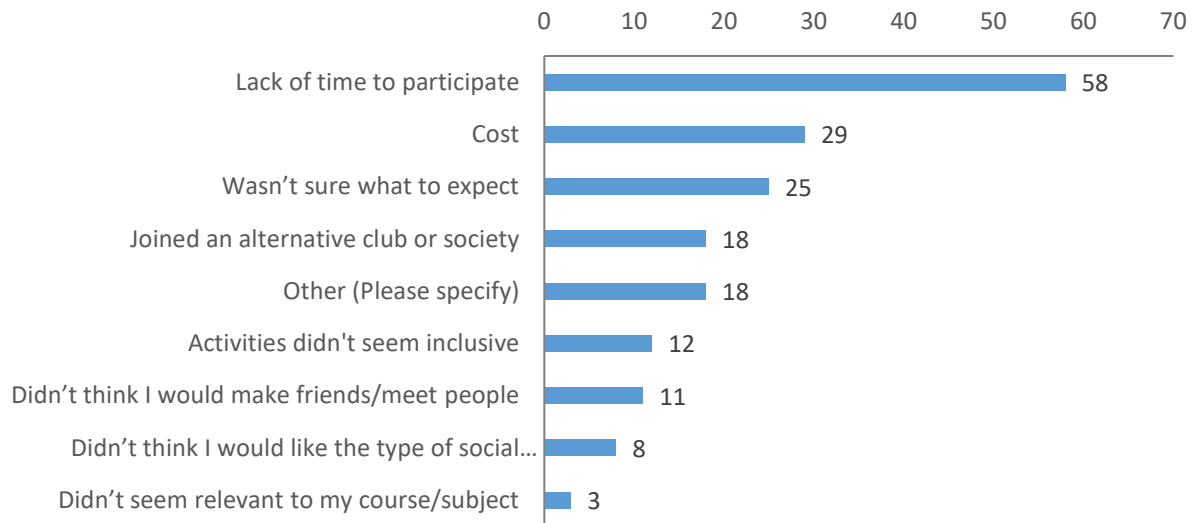
Figure 4: Reasons why students chose to leave a club or society (Base: 34 respondents, with multiple responses)

| Reason | Value |
|---|---|
| Didn't feel included | 15 |
| Other commitments e.g. Uni… | 14 |
| Didn't like the type of social events/activities | 11 |
| Not what I expected | 10 |
| Cost | 10 |
| Lack of time to participate | 10 |
| Didn't make friends/meet people | 6 |
| Other (Please specify) | 4 |
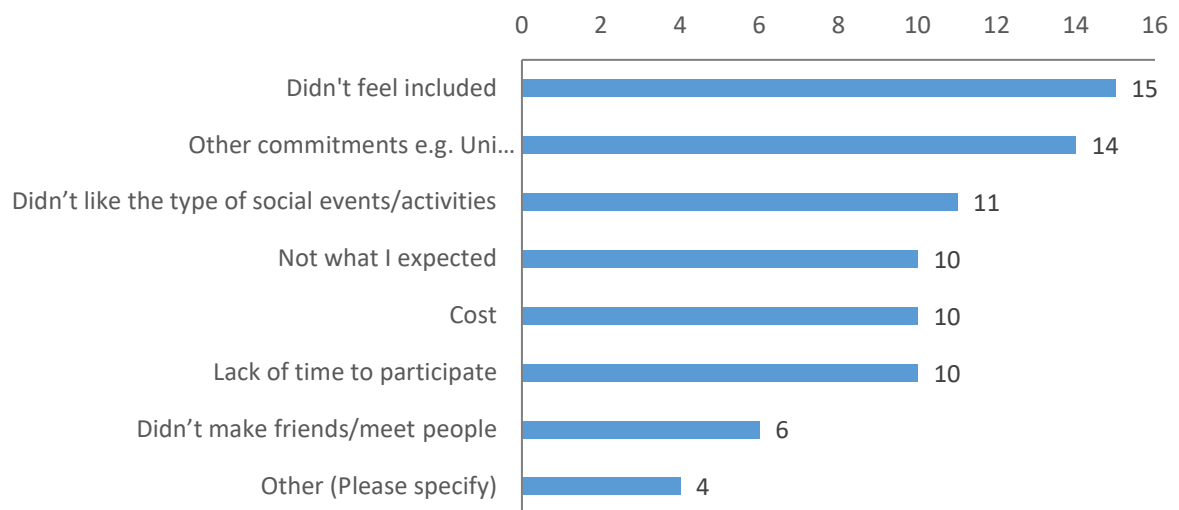
## Positive: friendship and socialisation

Overall, respondents were extremely positive of their experience of being in a JMSU club or society, with over half (54 per cent) indicated that their experience had been 'better than they expected'. Numerous reasons were cited and, naturally enough, the wish to be part of a different group, meeting new students and sharing interests, or developing new ones, with like-minded people featured prominently in the responses:

> *[The JMSU club/society] encouraged me to meet new people and get involved with people who have the same interests as me.*

> *I met loads of new people.*

These connections imparted significant emotional effects and outcomes - as some respondents reflected on strong ties or friendships, noting feelings of significant enculturation into a community or 'family'

> *I feel like we have become a sort of family.*

> *I found all of my best friends through joining my club'*

> *My university [experience] would not have been the same without the student group I joined.*

These feelings align with the findings of a study on engagement in 'student clubs' at a Romanian university - 'student clubs' were identified as those that are "typically self-organised or sponsored and led by external organisations" (Culic et al., 2016: 189). Culic et al. examined the type of socialisation and learning promoted by student clubs by applying Beard and Ragheb's (1983) Leisure Motivation Scale. Relative to the 'strongly agreed' responses, 88 per cent saw the student club as a place for socialisation and 79 per cent for new friendships. 67 per cent viewed the club as offering personal development, and 64 per cent rationalised expanding their interests.

## Positive: personal development

Respondents connected their engagement with the clubs and societies to their broader development. As Culic et al. (2016) noted, student clubs can develop teamwork, social skills, promote interpersonal relationships, through the extension of their peer networks. Whilst not picked up in the feedback, clubs and societies enable students to take on significant roles (e.g. chair/president, secretary, treasurer, publicity/social event co-ordinator), and this mobility within groups can be highly attractive to many prospective employers (Confederation of British Industry and NUS, 2011). The students responding to the survey stated:

> *[I have benefitted from] continuous professional development through the society.*

> *[I have been] able to gain new skills and improve on existing ones whilst meeting new people.*

> *I have been able to organise charity events, travel and make close friends.*

> *[I have been] part of a team.*

As noted earlier, at the start of 2019/20, the VP Activities pledged to highlight the connection between employability and engagement with a JMSU club or society in a bid to boost membership. This reflects the strong narrative in the sector, of "students as future workers" (Brooks, 2018: 750). Guan et al. (2016), in their analysis of five UK SU strategies, noted a shift away from the development of commercial activities toward 'membership services', in particular, clubs and societies. The SUs rationalised the importance of a "heightened student focus on long-recognised career benefits of developing CVs and skill sets attractive to employers", (Guan et al., 2016: 2105):

*Exeter SU integrated explicit employability considerations into training for SU activities. At Durham SU, enhanced focus on opportunities to participate in the SU or SU-sponsored clubs and societies followed from observations that such participation helped students 'cultivate a broader range of skills', which were important in the 'competitive employment environment'.*

Further, one of the SUs even published a guide for first years about acquiring employability skills via participation in clubs and societies "to develop team-working, administrative and leadership skills" (Guan et al., 2016: 2105).

## Negatives: lack of inclusivity and communication

About half of the students who had left a group cited a 'lack of feeling included' as a reason, or 'did not fit in with their club or society'. Some leaders of societies, in particular, were singled out to be "very difficult to get along with, which made it uncomfortable", whilst another stated that "some societies seem very elitist". Further, one thought that societies "didn't really make any attempt to integrate new members". There may be several reasons for this, but cultural differences or personal feelings were evident:

*It's hard to participate in a club where cliques exist and members are easily excluded.*

*Very cliquey, especially the sports ones.*

*Did not feel welcome, people were not that friendly which was difficult especially when you don't know anyone else that has joined.*

*'Lad' culture put me off sports clubs.*

It is important to note the context of engagement or how some students joined a club. For instance, one person described their nervous disposition:

*I thought it would be a good opportunity to make friends, however it made me constantly nervous for the events.*

Whilst another observed that joining in isolation presented particular challenges:

*Some people are joining alone and may not be as confident as people who have been part of the club for a few years.*

Another possible barrier relates to the way in which a club or society is run or organised:

*Imagine the possible mental health issues, for example, when a student reaches out to a society but hears nothing back. It might have been difficult to make that attempt but then to feel rejected could be awfully traumatic.*

*I did select to join a society but never received any responses, welcome messages, activity/talks information.*

The last comment above is especially pertinent to inclusivity. In their study, LUSU found that some societies did not respond to messages and, thus, some international students did not feel they had enough information to make an informed choice (Lilley and Barnes, 2017).

Many of the clubs and societies organise social events, which often involve drinking alcohol. This can be inhibiting to those who are teetotal, from cultures where excessive drinking is not the norm, or have certain faith groups:

> *I think that they should have a wide range of social activities outside of drinking.*

> *Insist on more socials that do not revolve around drinking and going out clubbing, it's not everyone's cup of tea.*

> *I do feel that if you don't drink alcohol you could feel left out though, as those who didn't drink tended to fall off the radar.*

These feelings align with the findings of an NUS survey that found that 21 per cent of students did not drink alcohol, or had stopped drinking. However, 70 per cent thought that students drink to fit in with their peers (NUS, 2018).

There were also strong suggestions that club or society membership was squarely aimed at first year students or younger students, thus restricting some from joining:

> *I was considering joining a sports team in 2nd year but didn't know if I could as wasn't a fresher.*

## Negatives: time and timing

By far the biggest obstacle to engagement with a sports club or society was time. In the Table 2 (which lists those societies that publicised meeting days and times on the JMSU website), most of the societies met in the evening, with only two (Islamic and Literature) organising meetings at lunchtime. (It is worth noting that the Islamic Society

organised meetings at three separate locations.)

| Society | Day/Time |
|---|---|
| Anime | Thu. 6-8.30pm |
| Book | Wed. 5-8.45pm |
| Choral & Music | Mon. 5-7pm |
|  | Thu. 6-8pm |
| Christian Union | Tue. 7-9pm |
| Creative Writing | Tue. 7-9pm |
| Dance Music/DJ | Thu. 6-10pm |
| Debating | Thu. 5-7pm |
| Drama | Wed. 7-8.45pm |
| Feminist | Tue. 5-8pm |
| Forensic Psych. | Wed. 5-7pm |
| Future in Finance | Mon. 6-7.30pm |
| Gospel Choir | Mon. 7-8.45pm |
| International | Mon. 6-8pm |
| Islamic | Mon. 5.30-7pm |
|  | Wed. 12-2.30pm |
|  | Fri. 12-2pm |
| Literature | Wed. 12-1.30pm |
| Liverpool Omani | Wed. 4-8.45pm |
|  | Fri. 4-7pm |
| Socialist Students | Wed. 4-5pm |
| Sociology | Thu. 6-8pm |
| Table Top Gaming | Tue. 4-8.30pm |

*Table 2: JMSU Societies meeting days/times*

As far as sports clubs are concerned, Wednesday is usually reserved as the 'match day' however, as noted below (Table 3), conditioning and training (or trials) are also features of the personal commitment required. Also evident in the table are the relatively late sessions compared with the societies' meeting times.

| Sports Club | Day/Time |
|---|---|
| American Football | Tue. 5-9pm |
| | Thu. 5-9pm |
| Badminton | Tue. 8-10pm |
| Futsal | Thu. 9-10pm |
| Men's Basketball | Mon. 8-10pm |
| | Thu. 8-10pm |
| Men's Football | Mon. 8-10pm |
| Men's Gaelic | Tue. 7-8pm |
| | Thu. 7-8pm |
| Men's Hockey | Mon. 7.30-9pm |
| Men's Rugby | Mon. 6-7pm |
| | Tue. 6-7pm |
| Tennis | Tue. 8-10pm |
| Ultimate Frisbee | Tue. 6-8pm |
| | Thu. 8-10pm |
| Women's Basketball | Mon. 8-10pm |
| Women's Lacrosse | Mon. 7-8pm |

It can be difficult to commit to more than one club or society and, as noted by some students, they may be enrolled on courses that do not start in September or could be off-campus and have a different experience of university:

> Some of the clubs' activities time clash with other clubs that I would like to join.

> You could ensure that some of the societies run during the time [when] nursing students are in university and [do] not close them down when the other students go home.

> Nursing students are on placement for a lot of the time and the societies don't seem to take that into account.

## Negatives: geography

There has been considerable attention paid to the impact of commuting and student engagement in HE. In a survey that

examined student loneliness and belonging, Trendence UK (2019) found that 49 per cent of non-commuter students were part of a student society, compared to just 36 per cent of commuter students, and just 19 per cent of commuter students were members of a sports club, compared with 35 per cent of non-commuters. In interviews with 60 commuter students, Thomas and Jones (2017) noted particular effects: commuting was considered to be tiring, expensive and stressful. The study also noted the sense of lacking a space to belong or "a sense of othering" (p. 7). This was noted in the following comments:

> A lot of the society's [activities] revolve around social events and this is hard when you're commuting.

> Due to [a] lack of city centre facilities [and] travel to take part in activities, means most people don't bother.

Relative to the sports clubs, many of the activities (e.g. training during the week) take place at venues away from the city centre, and having "venues … that don't require public transport to get to" featured in students' recommendations.

## Negatives: cost and payment arrangements

There are costs associated with engagement in many of the societies and sports clubs. In 2018/19 some societies arranged trips to other parts of the UK, and organised social events, such as an end of year ball. In addition to equipment costs, students engaged in some sports teams had perceptions of high fees (in spite of significant discounts negotiated by JMSU for equipment hire, coaching etc.).

Nevertheless, those engaged in sports clubs, or those wishing to engage, focused on costs ("Currently not enough money to fund sports without students having to pay high prices"). In LUSU's study, paying membership fees upfront at the start of an academic year, was off-putting for many international students, especially after paying significantly higher fees, accommodation costs and travel to the country. It was also noted that some 'short stay' international students balked at committing to year-long memberships (Lilley and Barnes, 2017).

In general, respondents noted having to make choices on very tight budgets:

> *I think the cost of joining societies is off-putting to students whose loans are used solely for covering rent and buying food. Personally, my loan is not sufficient for even covering my rent so all other expenses come from my own income, which also limits my availability for attending socials.*

The National Student Money Survey (n=3,385), conducted by Save the Student (2019), found that the maintenance loan often fell short of the average monthly spend of £807. 79 per cent of the respondents were worried about 'making ends meet' and the same percentage indicated that their social life had suffered as a result of their money concerns. In comparison with the 2018 data, respondents indicated cutting back on socialising. Students spent, on average, £49 per month on 'going out' in 2019, a drop of £15 when compared with 2018. The NUS's Poverty Commission (2018) examined the issue of class in post-16 education and noted a 'poverty premium' resulting in inhibiting their engagement in many aspects of the HE experience:

> *The dominant culture of higher education is middle class, and working class students can be made to feel they do not 'belong'* (NUS Poverty Commission, 2018: 10)

Glazzard (2017) concluded that working-class students' lack of economic capital meant that they were costed out of some activities or could not afford time to participate owing to term-time jobs. The following section discusses the themes identified in the findings and relates them to current thinking and practice in the sector.

## Discussion

Coming to university and joining a student-led club or society represents an excellent opportunity for students to make new connections and to develop skills or to cultivate new interests. In many cases, they offer an opportunity to extend friendships beyond a course or module. In Brooks' (2007) qualitative study on friendship in UK HE, friends made outside the academic arena, evolved to deeper connections, exposing students to more diverse worldviews, whilst providing significant emotional support and 'social learning' (p. 698) (see also Menzies and Baron, 2014).

Each society or sports club is different and, as evident in the findings, students welcomed meeting others with a shared interest. The social and cultural capital students expressed, of being in a team or in "a family" and "making friends for life", are powerful statements and must be viewed in the context of emerging data on student isolation. In a report commissioned by several UK SUs, it was found that those students that were involved in extracurricular activities were twice as likely to report having a large group of friends (29

per cent compared to 14 per cent of those that do not take part) and more likely to report having people to call on if they wanted to socialise or if they needed help (Trendence UK, 2019). In Trendence UK's survey, a sense of belonging was revealed to be much greater among those involved in extracurricular activities than those who did not take part in any extracurricular activities.

There is an assumption that a funded, full-time student with leisure time extending beyond their studies, is the norm. However, as noted by Trendence UK, the level of participation in extracurricular activities varies significantly by student profile. For instance, postgraduate students, those from a black/African/Caribbean background, and students working during term time (in excess of 15 hours a week) were less likely to be involved in extracurricular activity. As highlighted in this study, and emphasised by Day and Dickinson (2018), SU clubs and societies often involve costs, commitment and social activity "that isolate all but the most socially and financially resourced… [and] SU clubs and societies may mask social sorting by class, background or nationality" (p. 66).

Building social and cultural capital is at an imbalance, especially when compared with the 'privileged' at the opposite end of the spectrum. Trendence UK found that those students who attended private school were significantly more likely to be part of a student society and 14 per cent more likely, than their counterparts from state school, to be part of a sports club. Whilst living at home and commuting, and engaging with local (familiar) networks can help to bond and minimise the 'identity risks' for marginalised students associated with engaging in activities that might be thought of as middle class (Clayton et al., 2009;

Collins and Harrison, 2019; Patiniotis and Holdsworth, 2005), those connected to friends in a non-academic university arena can grow to be more self-reliant and confident (Brooks, 2017). In a citation of a study on working class students, when asked whether there had been involvement in any extracurricular activities, one student replied with a sense of regret (Little, 2006: 63),

> *No, just playing football…. That's what I was into at the time… wasn't into anything like politics or anything like that… the debate clubs… looking back I suppose I could have done with mixing a bit more… getting involved with clubs.*

In Stuart et al.'s (2011) assessment on the impact of engagement with extracurricular activities, it was noted that most alumni reflected positively on the social capital developed as a result of engaging in extracurricular activities like sports clubs and societies: they pointed to the development of self-identity, social networks and enhanced career prospects and pathways (see also Kerrigan, 2019). In the same study, 'lower socio-economic status students' were found to be spending more time working than engaging in voluntary extracurricular activities (Stuart et al., 2011).

There is a deeper barrier, as reflected in the comments on cliques or clashing personalities. This was noted in the 'culture shock' and sense of 'otherness' felt by international students in LUSU's study, who felt they were approached less when compared to home students during Lincoln's Freshers Fayre (Lilley and Barnes, 2017: 40):

> [International students] *found that those who wished to join an activity for the purpose of making friends felt that often members*

*already had established friendship groups or were unwilling to incorporate new members.*

A sense of 'otherness' or being a 'fish out of water' forms a powerful narrative in Glazzard's (2017) study which uncovered instances of students not being able to associate with an activity because of the "types of people" (p. 312) they attracted, because of a competitive and dominant behaviour. In our study, one person commented, 'Some clubs/societies are very difficult to get into if people just want to have fun and not to do it competitively'.

Mentions of a 'lad culture' in sports clubs, and perhaps associated rituals (hazing), could be reinforced by the nature of competitive sport. Some students were clearly intimidated by this, and this underlines the 'dark side' of bonding social capital. However, there are examples of 'good' bonding social capital and bridging social capital which the study did not fully capture. For instance, LJMU Netball has established an excellent track record of fundraising for local charities, which was rewarded by a 'Contribution to the Community Award' (2015), 'Club of the Year' (2018), and selection to represent JMSU/LJMU on a tour to Sri Lanka (2018). At a time when budgets for clubs and societies are tight, and when social mobility remains high on the agenda for government, positive examples that show the value of 'good' bonding social capital and bridging social capital have to be articulated (Day and Dickinson, 2018: 66).

This requires culture change. In 2018/19, JMSU issued guidance on developing good behaviours (such as eradicating initiation ceremonies) and establishing a more inclusive environment. 'Equality, Diversity, Inclusion' (EDI) training, engagement with

JMSU's Equality Reps, and statements on how clubs and societies were addressing democracy and decision-making, were initiated as a result of this study. This reflects both the mood in the sector (BUCS, 2018; Milani and Shotton, 2018; Robinson, 2019) and evolving JMSU practice (Penny, 2019). For instance, at the start of 2019/20, the Respect Always! Charter was released, as a shared vision of JMSU and LJMU:

"The Charter is a statement of our passionate commitment to ensuring that LJMU is a place where everyone can be themselves and is respected for being who they are; a place where we are all equal but never the same; a place where the things that make each of us different make our university stronger.

"We value the warm, friendly and supportive atmosphere of this university and our strong sense of community and pride in our home city, but we do not take that for granted. We are determined that in everything that we do, no matter how small – in our formal roles within the University and the Students' Union and as individuals who make up the LJMU community – to treat each other and our environment with consideration, kindness thoughtfulness and care.

**"We are committed to demonstrating Respect, Always!"**

## Conclusion

> *Optimism and pessimism come together in organisations.  They provide us with a sense of private identity and are critical to how we cope with the world together.  So student organisations, those owned by students and run in their explicit interests, should matter to us.*
>
> (Day and Dickinson, 2018: 9)

Whilst this study was a very simple ground clearing exercise, the findings emphasise the necessity for a more nuanced appreciation of the experiences of student engagement in student-led sports teams or societies. Understanding the experience from the perspective of social capital offers a useful and critical frame.  It helps to address senses of 'being' and 'becoming' (Barnett, 2007) – of identity formation, freedom, responsibility, academic citizenship, societal engagement, enterprise, agency, emotion, feeling, wellbeing and desire.

The NSS (National Student Survey), that measures the 'satisfaction' of final year students in HE institutions in England, Wales and Northern Ireland with various aspects of the student experience, has included a question about the SU.  As Brooks et al. (2015b) contend, SUs are now under the same performative pressures as the wider institutions within which they are situated.  This increased sense of consumerism has heightened expectations of what the university/SU experience, beyond teaching and learning, might provide – especially in relation to extracurricular activities (Holton, 2018). It is therefore vital that student-led clubs and societies demonstrate inclusivity and purpose, whilst enabling students to connect with each other and the world around them (JMSU, 2017).

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**JMSU Freshers Fair 2019**

Highlights of the JMSU Freshers Fair 2019 can be viewed at this link: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s6lGIo71dKo



(Produced by The Guide, Liverpool)

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## Appendix A: JMSU Societies and Sports Clubs

| JMSU Societies | |
|---|---|
| Afro-Caribbean | International |
| Anime | Islamic |
| Biology | Journalism |
| Book | Labour Students |
| Business | Law |
| Catholic | LGBTQ+ |
| Christian Union | Literature |
| Comedy | Liverpool Omani Students |
| Conservation | LJMU CATS Campaign (cancer awareness) |
| Creative Writing | LJMU Student Minds (mental health) |
| Chinese Student & Scholar Association | LJMU Student Radio |
| Dance Music & DJ | Musicians & Singers |
| Debating | Natural History Documentary |
| Disabled Students | Photography |
| Drama | Poker |
| Emergency Medicine | Pole Fitness |
| E-Sports | Postgraduate |
| Feminist | Psychology |
| Film | Socialist Students |
| Forensic Psychology & Criminal justice | Sociology |
| Future in Finance | Student Church |
| Games Development | Table Top Gaming |
| Gospel Choir | Vegetarian & Vegan |
| Goth | Yoga |
| Heels | Zoology |
| History | |

| JMSU Sports Teams | |
|---|---|
| American Football | Men's Rugby League |
| Athletics & Cross Country | Men's Rugby Union |
| Badminton | Mixed martial Arts |
| Cheerleading | Netball |
| Climbing | Pool & Snooker |
| Cricket | Powerlifting |
| Dance | Rounders |
| Darts | Rowing |
| Equestrian | Ski & Snowboarding |
| Futsal | Skydiving |
| Golf | Swim Team |
| Gymnastics | Tennis |
| Handball | Trampoline |
| Jiu-jitsu | Ultimate Frisbee |
| Karate | Volleyball |
| Ladies Gaelic | Women's Basketball |
| Men's Basketball | Women's Football |
| Men's Football | Women's Hockey |
| Men's Gaelic | Women's Lacrosse |
| Men's Hockey | Women's Rugby Union |