Introduction

Based in central London, Kings College London Students’ Union (KCLSU) is spread across four geographically separate sites. The Union is a democratic charity, separate from Kings College London, offering a range of services and student activities. Five elected officers, supported by staff and student volunteers, lead the Union. A trustee board, formed of the elected officers, four elected student trustees, and four external trustees, hold the overall responsibility for the charity, its assets, and its activities. The Union is currently undergoing a significant development of its spaces. The Union has achieved an NSS q23 satisfaction score of 66%. The Union states:

‘For every member to reach their potential, making the most of their time at King’s so that they leave ready and able to shape the future.’

Kings College London is a large Russel Group, top 25 in the world University. The student population is currently around 27,600 made up of undergraduate, postgraduate, full-time and part-time students.

KCLSU comprehensively achieved Part A of Quality Students’ Union’s and submitted a comprehensive self-assessment for Part B. This self-assessment document was supported by significant, cross-referenced documentary evidence. Of particular note, the Union’s self-assessment also identified areas for further work.

There was a very strong sense of recognition and pride in what the Union had achieved in recent years amongst many students. There was a clear response that students felt that KCLSU is ‘their’ Union. KCLSU is a Very Good students’ union and is clearly on a journey to deliver even more impact to its membership. The Union is clearly very well lead, managed and governed and has an excellent understanding of where it is and where it is going. The Union delivers many very good activities and services for its members and is proving to be a leader in the sector in engaging previously unengaged members.
Strategic Planning

Strategic planning at Kings College London Students’ Union is Excellent. The Union has a five-year strategic ‘Big’ plan that resulted from a period of extensive research and engagement with the Union’s members, elected officers, and staff. As a result, the plans has been purposefully aligned with the needs of its members and linked to the current context in which the Union operates. The Union’s ‘Big Plan’ is widely accessible to the Union’s membership and other interested parties via the Union’s website. The presentation of this plan is of a very high quality. The layout of the plan helps the reader gain an understanding of the role of the Union and guides them through the planning process from the concepts to the actions in a way that is clear and accessible. While knowledge of the detail of this plan did appear to be low amongst the membership, all could feel the influence of this planning process.

KCLSU has identified the vision:
‘For every member to reach their potential, making the most of their time at King’s so that they leave ready and able to shape the future.’

Together with the mission:
‘Together with our members, we are a union of students where individuals connect, have fun, build communities, share experiences and make change.’

The Union also identifies five values as “...the words that we use to describe how we are as people within an organisation. It is how we go about our work.” These values are Student Led, People-oriented, Innovative, Straightforward, and Sustainable.

Beneath this, the ‘Big Plan’ identifies four priorities:
Priority 1: Support, information, and advice for student life
Priority 2: Building a Students’ Union for all
Priority 3: Supporting student-led communities
Priority 4: Empowering student change-makers

The ‘Big Plan’ clearly describes what each of these priorities means in real terms and sets out clear, unambiguous targets to be achieved by 2019. These priorities are further distilled in annual operating plans and, further still, to departmental plans and individual appraisal objectives. The plan is largely holistic and encompasses many of the activities of the Union in a way that promotes a degree of synergy. The Union also clearly recognises a need for this planning to retain a degree of flexibility to enable the plan to adapt in response to regular reviews.

Understanding of the strategic plan by its elected officers, staff and University stakeholders was strong. In all cases, these stakeholder groups felt they had been consulted in the development of the plan and could describe how they were involved in developing the strategy. This level of stakeholder engagement undoubtedly contributed to the high degree of credibility of the strategic plans and the planning process amongst these groups.

Assessment
Excellent

Relationships and Partnerships

KCLSU has sought to understand its diverse membership with the express intention of understanding how they are perceived, how students use their services and where areas for improvement may exist. The Union has clearly been very successful at connecting with groups of members that had been previously unengaged or not engaged in a suitable format. Evidence of the
Unions work to develop effective relationships was highly evident in the launch of the King’s Doctoral Student Association which has the aim of specifically addressing an area where representation needed to be improved. Overall, Relationships and Partnerships is Very Good. The Union has a strong, proactive relationship with the University. The Union has a formal memorandum of understanding which details the legal framework of the relationship. Numerous personal connections between Union and University staff and officers underpins this formal document. The outcomes of these relationships were clearly apparent, exemplified in particular by the operational links between the Unions advice team and University departments. Particular testament to the strength of this relationship is the Universities ongoing commitment to dedicating new, significant spaces for the Union.

It was clear that the Union has built strong relationships across sections of its membership, and that these members felt an affinity to the Union. The Union has an exceptional understanding of the complex yet critical importance of the relationships between the Education Officers, the student representatives, and the student-led representative bodies. The Union is also an active participant with NUS and could evidence where it has invested resource to ensure this continues. The union was able to evidence where it had proactively built and maintained strong relationships or partnerships with all of its stakeholders, to provides benefits to its members. These relationships and partnerships are further reinforced by significant networking, both within and beyond the student movement.

There was evidence that internal relationships between departments, staff and officers were, for the most part, very strong and that these relationships promoted the delivery of union activities and the achievement of planned outcomes.

**Assessment**
Very Good

**Governance**
Governance at KCLSU complies with the NUS Good Governance Guide and is therefore Very Good. The Union clearly recognises the value of strong operating frameworks, well-documented policies, and procedures and uses a board sub-committee to promote effective governance. The union was able to demonstrate how it has selected external trustees who could bring profession and/or specialist knowledge to its governance structure, to support a high level of scrutiny. The Union has a trustee board that comprises of student officers, students and external trustees. The external trustees are chosen to bring specific skills to the board. The trustee board has four subcommittees each with clearly defined responsibilities and accountabilities. The Union could evidence that its trustees had been trained and were well able to undertake their role(s) effectively. The union was able to demonstrate a clear governance system to generate, review and update its policies, processes, and structures. Within the Union, knowledge of these systems was strong. The Union has strong financial procedures; finances are scrutinised through the governance structures and externally audited each year. The union was able to evidence that the trustee board was held to account at the AGM.

The union communicates its strategic plan annually, resulting in its members having some awareness of its plans.

The union’s constitution and by-laws were current, relevant and reflected reality.

**Assessment**
Very Good
Democracy

It was clear that KCLSU strives to ensure its members truly are at the heart of Union. The Union notes that “We are run by students for students. As an organisation we’re led by Student Officers as both our colleagues and trustees. Every student has a voice. We’re here to listen and act”. KCLSU is a Very Good democratic organisation. The Union has recently completed a Student Decision Making Review (SDMR) which has led to recommendations for significant changes to the Unions by-laws and democratic structures. This review has been exceptionally thorough and has involved significant consultation. The outcomes of this review are planned to be in place by September 2016. These revised structures will further ensure students can engage in determining the political, financial and strategic direction of the Union should they wish to. Furthermore, these structures will ensure students are enabled to participate in identifying problems, analysing options, and selecting solutions. The revision to these democratic structures is also designed to ensure members of under-represented groups become engaged in their Union elections and aspects of the decision-making processes. The Union holds fair and open cross-campus ballots for all the central office positions in line with the requirements of the 1994 Education Act. Election turn-out was shown to be increasing alongside the number of candidates standing for positions. As a result, the Union considers that the candidates and electorate at the most recent election broadly reflect the diversity of the Union.

Assessment

Very Good

People

The management of people is Very Good. The staff at KCLSU are a key asset, and those staff spoken to were highly engaged in the Union. The majority of staff felt that they had had a personal contribution to the development of the Union in a manner that was valued. Internal communications appeared to be another area of strength, and career staff felt informed on the central issues and able to respond should they wish to. KCLSU has robust processes to manage the performance of all career staff through regular one to one meetings. At these meetings, staff are given an opportunity to agree on objectives, review their progress against existing objectives and identify training needs. Staff objectives are aligned to the Union’s annual operating plan to ensure that each member of the team is clear on the role that they play in delivering the ‘Big Plan.' Additionally, the Union is striving to create better links between the organisational objectives and training to ensure that staff are appropriately equipped to be able to deliver the Unions objectives. The Union undertakes comprehensive annual staff surveys which have helped identify both areas of strong performance and areas for development.

Assessment

Very Good

Communication

KCLSU recognises that effective communication is critical to its success and endeavours to communicate regularly with every student in a way that is relevant manner. As a result, communication is planned and conveys key messages. Members, in many cases, felt that they broadly knew what is happening in their union. The Union has aligned its marketing priorities with its ‘Big Plan’ Objectives and has six large-scale campaigns around joining, sharing, shaping, supporting and celebrating.
It appeared likely that the membership as a whole has some understanding and knowledge of the union’s activities, operations, and key messages. These students also felt that they had the appropriate knowledge to enable them to participate actively in the Union should they wish to. Across the entire membership, it appeared likely that the depth of this understanding would be notably stronger among the most engaged members. KCLSU have also begun a ‘Digital Transformation’ project which aims to deliver segmented, targeted communications in ways that suit the audience best. Overall, communication at KCLSU is currently Very Good.

While less readily identified by the Union, its communications with all its other stakeholders are clearly effective due to the level of understanding of its role and key messages. The strength of the relationships the Union has with the University and other stakeholders indicated the success of the Union’s communications.

KCLSU understands the value of its brand and understands the need for every student to recognise and feel a sense of ownership with the Union. With this in mind, the Union has very recently refreshed their brand in response to member research.

**Assessment**
Very Good

**Services**
KCLSU offer a range of services to their membership both directly and through partners. These services include student activities, advice, student media, volunteering, academic representation and commercial services. A number of these services, notably advice, are clearly excellent and sector leading, while the Union has set priorities for development of others. Overall, services are Good.

The Union undertakes an annual student survey, from which it was evident that the membership is largely satisfied with the services the Union provides; a view that was very much re-enforced by the students interviewed during the visit.

The Union has a high level of awareness of the members who uses their services (and the sections of the membership who does not), what works and what could be improved. The Union has seized an opportunity, presented by a new University building, to create a new, better-suited space which will enable greater opportunities for service delivery and student engagement.

Students are engaged directly in the development of these provisions through parts of the Union’s strategic plan, the advisory boards and the ‘Better Union’ forum. As a result, the services are consistent with what is required, are well used and are valued by the membership.

The Union notes the need to prioritise the development of its commercial services to ensure they are as effective and efficient as possible.

**Assessment**
Good

**Participation**
KCLSU is committed to membership participation and set organisational KPI’s that primarily focus on participation and student leadership development.

The union can demonstrate that it provides a wide range of participation opportunities to its members and actively promotes them. These participations opportunities include democratic engagement and student activities such as sports, societies, and volunteering. Knowledge of participation opportunists was, generally, good, particularly around student activities. Overall, participation at KCLSU is Very Good.

Many of the participation opportunities are of a very high quality. All of the interviewed students made emphatic comments about the high quality and diversity of the clubs and societies. Additionally, many students commented on how these activities had improved over recent years.
KCLSU recognises that participation in union democracy could be improved and is about to embark on major changes to its democratic systems. These changes are designed to enable any student to submit an idea, to participate in decision-making and, critically, to develop the solutions to the issues that affect them most. Election turnout and the number of candidates has increased as more students become engaged and participate in the running of their union.

The Union has undertaken specific work with ‘Widening Participation’ and has over thirty groups engaged in this activity.

The Union clearly understands the two-way process of volunteering and the benefits it brings and has specific plans to develop the numbers of student participants.

**Assessment**

Very Good

**Representation and Campaigning**

Representation and Campaigning is Very Good at KCLSU. The Union has a well-resourced student voice team that helps create effective networks of student leaders, representatives, and campaigners.

The Union provides comprehensive training sessions for its student representatives. This training is re-enforced by the ongoing support provided indirectly via Facebook and newsletter and directly by the Unions Engagement and Representation officers. As a result, student representatives are engaged and aware of the main aspects of their role.

The Union was able to demonstrate that its elected officers can make valid representations at institution committee meetings. This effectiveness is due to thorough preparation including an evidence-based understanding of the views of Union members on central issues. The University highly value these representations and, as a result, when making major decisions, student perspectives are communicated and considered.

The Union notes its heritage as a campaigning Union, a view that was strongly echoed by many of the students interviewed. There was clear evidence that the Union proactively encourages individual members and groups of members to run campaigns. The Union provides very strong support, through their campaigns co-ordinator and their officer team, with the clear remit of delivering campaign objectives. As a result, the Union can give numerous, significant, examples of where campaigns have brought about real, tangible change for the membership. Many students were able to identify how these campaigns had had an impact on their student experience.

KCLSU students and officers take an active role in NUS events and campaigns, engaging in national campaigns and ensuring that their opinions are heard at a national level.

**Assessment**

Very Good

**Review and Evaluation**

Review and evaluation is a core aspect of the governance, leadership, and management of KCLSU. The Union has set out clear goals in its strategic plan and has developed a comprehensive system to track progress against these objectives every quarter. As a result, the Union has a strong understanding of its performance, where it is performing well and where performance is behind expectation. Additionally, KCLSU has a very clear understanding, driven by its review and evaluation mechanisms including the Unions QSU self-assessment, of its areas for future development. Review and Evaluation is Very Good at KCLSU.

KCLSU has a range of mechanisms to collect data and create comparisons over time using Key Performance Indicators which enable progress tracking. Aspects related to review and evaluation were evidently a key agenda item at the board meeting, the various subcommittees, senior leadership discussions and an important element of staff objective setting and appraisal.
In addition to the review of strategic plan objects and related KPI’s, the Union has also undertaken specific evaluations of key functions to ensure the quality of the services in the future. Based on this review and evaluation practices it was clear that officers, staff, and the University had a good awareness of how the Union is performing, however, this knowledge appeared to be less complete amongst the membership.

**Assessment**

Very Good

**Context**

KCLSU has comprehensive mechanisms in place to routinely analyse the complex context in which it operates. These mechanisms are key in ensuring that the Union’s plan remain relevant and can bring about adjustments as required. The union was able to show that it can react and adapt to changes in its members' views and needs. As a result, KCLSU has an **Excellent** understanding of the unique context in which it works.

The union was clearly able to show that it has an understanding of its current capacity and the need to increase that capacity to meet with specific future demands.

The union was able to evidence that its structures, procedures, and processes have in-built flexibilities that allow the union to evolve to meet the future needs of its members continuously.

The Unions clearly demonstrated these flexibilities with its plans to be a ‘liberated’ union as a proactive response to membership requests to do more to support liberation groups.

**Assessment**

Excellent

**Impact**

The union was able to evidence that it has a strong focus on delivering impacts for its members. KCLSU’s vision sets out a clear high-level impact ‘For every member to reach their potential, making the most of their time at King’s so that they leave ready and able to shape the future.’ The Union uses a theory of change that focuses on impact which ensures the majority of the work of the Union is targeted, explicitly towards delivering impact. As a result, impact of KCLSU is **Very Good**.

The Union’s review and evaluation processes help capture a broad range of outputs and allows these to be recorded and presented in an accessible manner. As noted in the ‘Review and Evaluation’ section the Union was able to indicate significant evidence of where this knowledge has influenced on-going management and planning.

Owing to the quality of the Union’s communication the most engaged members were aware of some its effects and, as a result, did feel that their Union had a positive impact.

The Union could also indicate areas where its activities had enriched its parent institution, its local community, and the national movement. The University openly supported this view.

**Recommendations for Further Development**

- The self-assessment produced for Quality Students’ Unions is of a very high standard and as such has provided a good framework for drawing out self-identified ‘priorities for improvement.’ It is recommended that the Union undertake an annual self-assessment as part of its review and evaluation process to continue to identify these priorities and to track progress.

- The Union could give consideration to further developing insight around the development of its ‘values.’ This insight could be of particular worth should the values evolve or change in the future. A clear understanding of the development of these values would enable more positive student input in the future.

- The Union could give consideration to further linking its strategic aims to its activities at the point of delivery. In practice, this may simply be a case of visually highlighting the enacted value or strategic priority at the point where the activity is happening. This linkage would
further re-enforce students understanding of the translation of strategic planning into actions. The development of new union spaces would appear to give an opportunity to explore this recommendation.

- With the strong long-term strategic planning in place, it is recommended that the Union seek reassurance that each successive officer team can appropriately engage in influencing the priorities of the Union on an annual basis.
- It is acknowledged that the planned revisions to the democratic structures will address all of the issues around knowledge, participation, and accessibility. It is recommended that the Union consider reviewing these revisions in twelve months’ time to ensure that the changes have had the anticipated impacts on democratic engagement.
- In collaboration with the University, the Union could consider some form of Partnership Agreement in addition to its memorandum of understanding. This document could help to explain the links between the Union and the University, and the role of the Union in relationship to the University, particularly around academic representation. This type of document has been shown to help students to understand the relationship between the Union and the University better. The Union could then consider how the Partnership Agreement is communicated to ensure that it is as widely recognised and understood by students. An example of another partnership can be found here: https://youtu.be/aqy71h_ZZy4
- The Union should consider its relationship with its staff who are students. In particular, it is recommended that the Union review the perceived status of these staff. This review could be undertaken alongside the Unions planned 'Equality Impact Assessment.' Furthermore, the Union could consider exploring the suitability of greater parity between all staff, including student staff, around reward, recognition, engagement and communication.
- It is recommended that in light of the challenges of new physical and virtual spaces alongside a refreshed brand, the Union makes full use of current touch points such as Freshers Fayre as a vehicle for effective communications and member engagement. It is suggested that the Union could consider how it could better link the Union, and the Union brand, to student activities to improve visibility and to ensure that the membership is fully aware of the role of their Union.
- The Union should take steps to reassure itself that a move towards more digital-based communications does not lead to a disengagement of some sections of the student population.
- The Union should consider developing a dedicated commercial strategy to ensure that the historical trading deficit is removed and converted into an income. This strategy should be a ‘zero-based’ examination of the Unions current provision, the member research that has been already completed and an assessment of the state of commercial services in the sector. Together this would form the basis for a comprehensive plan for the future.
- The Union should give consideration to engaging and working alongside with other Unions who share an aspiration to increase the impact of student advice services further. Working in partnership with other organisations, the Union could consider developing an ‘impact practice’ approach to the planning and delivery of an advice provision.
- As mentioned above in the context of advice services, the Union should give consideration to developing an overall ‘impact practice’ approach to its annual planning. This approach would help the measuring of impact and the delivery of even greater levels of impact.
- The Union could explore undertaking ‘action research’ to methodically examine the impacts that result from new activities/initiatives. The Union could then also consider sharing successful practices.

**Acknowledgements**

I would like to extend my thanks to Rhian Johns, Jack Haywood and Mo Wiltshire together with the staff for welcoming me to their Union and making the QSU verification process possible. I would

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also like to thank University staff members Chris Shelley (Director of student services) and John Worne (COO Arts and Sciences) for their time and their very insightful input. Finally, I would like to thank for all of the students who made time to talk with me both formally in meetings and informally around the campus.

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