

Delivering the Blueprint in a Small Students' Union

When Staff Lead the Process and Students Lead the Direction

The Big Idea

Not every Students' Union has a team of full-time Sabbatical Officers.

Some Students' Unions are led by:



A small number of voluntary student representatives



Academic reps



One or two professional staff members



Limited time and capacity

If that's your reality, the Blueprint is still for you.

The goal isn't to recreate the structures of a larger SU. The goal is to ensure students' experiences and priorities shape the work, while staff provide the continuity and capacity needed to make progress.

Why This Matters

Care-experienced and estranged students are often a relatively small student population.

In larger SUs, full-time Officers may have the capacity to lead campaigns, gather evidence, meet university leaders, and coordinate action.

In smaller SUs, that level of student-led delivery isn't always realistic.

Without staff support, there is a risk that:



The work never starts



Progress stalls between academic years



Students are expected to carry too much responsibility



Important issues never reach decision-makers



Students should shape the priorities. They shouldn't be expected to do all the work themselves.

What Good Looks Like

In a small Students' Union, success often comes from a partnership between students and staff.

Students help to:

-  Share experiences and priorities
-  Identify issues that matter most
-  Influence what should happen next
-  Hold the union accountable

Staff help to:

-  Gather information and evidence
-  Meet with university departments
-  Complete the Audit Workbook and Action Planner
-  Maintain momentum throughout the year
-  Coordinate activity and partnerships



The key shift: From “Students must do everything themselves.” to “Students set the direction, staff help make it happen.”

What Does Student-Led Actually Mean?

“Student-led” doesn’t necessarily mean students complete every task.

Student-led means:

- Students influence priorities
- Students’ experiences inform decision-making
- Students help define success
- The work remains accountable to students

A member of staff might organise meetings, gather data, write plans, or maintain relationships with university colleagues. That doesn’t make the work any less student-centred.



Leadership and delivery are not always the same thing.



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What If We Don't Have Care-Experienced or Estranged Students Involved?

You may not have:

A care-experienced and estranged students' network

Students who are comfortable disclosing their circumstances

Students actively campaigning on these issues

Large enough numbers to create dedicated representation structures

That doesn't mean the work should stop.

The Blueprint draws on:

 Student lived experience

 Research and evaluation

 Sector-wide practice

 Real examples from universities across the UK

The Unite Foundation's resources provide valuable insight into the barriers students commonly face and the changes that can make the biggest difference.



Use local insight where it exists. Use sector evidence where it doesn't.
Use both wherever possible.

A Practical Model for Small SU's

A simple way to approach the Blueprint is:

Step 1: Use the workshop materials

Staff facilitate conversations with student representatives using the Blueprint explainer slides and resources.

The goal is not to make students become accommodation experts.

The goal is to explore:

What feels relevant locally?

What concerns are students raising?

What opportunities exist for improvement?



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Step 2: Complete the Blueprint Audit Workbook

Staff can coordinate this process with input from student representatives and university colleagues.

Ask:

What are we already doing well?

Which rooms need further development?

Where are the biggest opportunities?

Step 3: Develop a Blueprint Action Plan

Using the Blueprint Action Planner, identify a small number of priorities.

Remember: Progress matters more than perfection.

Step 4: Keep students involved

As activity progresses:

 Check priorities still feel relevant

 Share updates

 Celebrate successes

 Adjust plans as needed

Students don't have to lead every meeting to remain at the centre of the work.

What This Means for Staff

If you're the staff member supporting this work:

You are not replacing student voice. You are:

 Creating the conditions for student voice to influence change

 Supporting representative structures

 Bringing together evidence and insight

 Helping turn priorities into action

In many small Students' Unions, staff provide the continuity that allows long-term change to happen. That's a strength, not a weakness.



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What This Means for Student Representatives

You don't need to become a housing expert, you don't need to lead every conversation with the university, and you don't need to have lived experience yourself.

What you can do is:

-  Listen to student concerns
-  Ask good questions
-  Highlight issues that matter
-  Help shape priorities
-  Work alongside staff and university partners

Your role is to help steer the work, not to carry it alone.

Key Takeaway

The Blueprint is designed to improve the lives of care-experienced and estranged students. How that work happens will look different in different Students' Unions.

In larger SUs, Officers may lead the work

In smaller SUs, staff may take a bigger role in delivery

Both approaches can be successful. What matters is that students remain at the heart of the process.

The goal isn't who completes the work. The goal is building a university where care-experienced and estranged students have a safe and stable #HomeAtUniversity.

What Next?

For smaller Students' Unions, a simple approach is:

1. Run a Blueprint workshop with student representatives
2. Complete the Blueprint Audit Workbook
3. Develop a Blueprint Action Plan
4. Review progress throughout the year
5. Capture learning through the Handover Document and SU Annual Return



Students should shape the destination. Staff can help navigate the route.

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