

# NUSU ACADEMIC SOCIETIES FUNDING SCHEME EVALUATION REPORT

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# NUSU Academic Societies Funding Scheme

## Evaluation Report

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### Executive Summary

1. This evaluation report for the NUSU Academic Societies Funding Scheme (ASF scheme) will investigate the effectiveness of the scheme against its expected outcomes and make recommendations for improvements. The report uses Theory of Change methodology to evaluate what has worked and what needs improving for this new funding scheme.
2. The ASF scheme, facilitated by £20,000 funding from Newcastle University, aimed to give academic societies the opportunity to carry out welcome events for new students, and to enable 6-weeks of free membership to these for new students. Academic societies were invited to apply for funding in August 2022 by outlining events that they would carry out in September and October 2022 with the aim of increasing a sense of belonging within their societies.
3. Key findings from student consultations informing the NUSU 2021 Strategic Plan suggest that students believe sense of belonging to be “critical to a positive student experience”. Research from Newcastle University supports the theory that students’ sense of belonging is comprised of both ‘social fit’ and ‘academic fit’, and that the academic school is a key site of belongingness for students.
4. The evaluation suggests that the funding received **has been associated with the creation of a sense of belonging** within academic societies, particularly from the perspective of academic society committees.
5. 92% of committees that responded to the question “I would apply/encourage the application to this fund again for the 2023/24 academic year”, agreed or strongly agreed with the statement.
6. Key recommendations from the evaluation highlight that, although there have been positive outcomes, some improvements could be made to ensure the scheme is better able to meet its expected outcomes and create greater impact for students.
7. One barrier to achieving the expected outcome of increasing academic school involvement with their academic societies was a lack of awareness about the scheme. **A key recommendation is to raise awareness and encourage academic school participation and provision of support to their academic societies.**
8. A barrier to accessing the 6 weeks free membership and welcome events was the lack of awareness about the free memberships. **A key recommendation is to promote this which could be done through integrating information about the scheme into society committee training and advertising it at societies fairs.**
9. The evaluation shows that the funding has contributed to a number of successful outcomes, with significant progress made in increasing students' engagement with academic societies and increasing students' sense of belonging academically and socially. Implementing recommendations will improve the scheme for future.

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## 1. Introduction

This evaluation report for the NUSU Academic Societies Funding Scheme will investigate the effectiveness of the scheme against its expected outcomes and make recommendations for improvements. The evaluation has been co-created by Emily Halsall, NUSU Academic Societies Intern and BA History student, and Charlotte Boulton, Inclusive Newcastle Research, Evaluation & Policy Officer and Evaluation Mentor for this project, in a NUSU-Inclusive Newcastle partnership. The report, written by Emily Halsall, uses Theory of Change methodology to evaluate what has worked and what needs improving for this new funding scheme.

In March 2022 NUSU sent a funding bid to Newcastle University asking for £20,000 to give out to Academic Societies. This would enable these academic societies to put on welcome events in September and October 2022 with the key aims of creating a sense of belonging for new students and allowing them to connect with their peers. New students would get 6 weeks of free membership to these academic societies and could then decide whether to buy the full membership for the continuation of the year. Academic societies, also referred to as 'course-based' societies, are societies that form around an academic subject but are not run by the school. They are open to all students, not just those that study the corresponding course, but membership is usually mostly from students who study the related discipline.

At the end of the funding period NUSU had spent £16,754.77 of the £20,000 budget. A small amount of this extra funding was spent on facilitating focus groups on this evaluation, which left approximately £3,215. 79% of academic societies (55 out of 70) applied to this funding and no societies asked for more than the recommended £500. With a continuation of the funding, increased awareness would be expected and therefore an increase in take-up from societies and confidence to ask for more than £500. Out of the total 55 applicants, 41 of were accepted, this included five resubmissions, to create a 75% success rate. Applications were rejected on grounds of events suggested being centred around alcohol and too little information provided for the planned activities. Societies were allowed to resubmit with changes to their events, however 11 societies did not take up this opportunity.

### **Timeline of the funding:**

- **March 2022:** NUSU sent a funding bid to the university.
- **August 2022 – October 2022:** The new society committees were invited to complete the application form and apply for funding.
- **September – October 2022:** The societies received funding if their application was accepted, and they created welcome activities for students.
- **September – October 2022:** New students were allowed 6-weeks of free membership to any academic society, and students in other year groups were allowed free membership to any academic society they had not yet tried.

### **NUSU's Code of Conduct:**

NUSU's code of conduct is laid out in their Students Societies Constitution which is sent out to each committee. It declares that "the following Activities or behaviours are forbidden on student socials:

- I. Forced alcohol consumption.
- II. Forced substance consumption.
- III. Forced physical challenge or physically risk behaviour.
- IV. Forced humiliation.
- V. Dangerous and/or criminal activity.
- VI. Taking improper advantage of any students as a result of an imbalance of power/position."

NUSU's definition of 'forced': "The term 'forced' applies to any instance where an individual feels pressurised or believes that they must participate in order to be accepted in a group situation".

Therefore, NUSU did not want alcohol-centred events being mentioned on application forms due to the pressure it might put on students to drink in order to feel accepted within the society. This is especially poignant during the induction period when new students feel pressure to quickly make friends and may be easily forced into doing things they do not want to do.

## **Research Background**

The research background in the creation of the Academic Societies Funding Scheme forms crucial context for the development of the evaluation (see the Context column in the Theory of Change logic model in the next section). Various sources of evidence and insights have informed the evaluation.

The initial bid for the funding discusses findings from research with students to inform the NUSU 2021 Strategic Plan and NUSU 2025 Strategic Plan. Key findings from both suggest that students believe sense of belonging to be "critical to a positive student experience". The bid also highlights that "while it is strongly acknowledged that the variety of NUSU clubs and societies play a significant role in creating a sense of belonging, currently only around 10,000 students join societies (and 5,000 join sports clubs)". With approximately 21,500 students (undergraduate and postgraduate) on campus, there are still around 6,500 students who have not engaged in societies or clubs, who could benefit in NUSU's facilitation of sense of belonging. This suggests a clear gap for this project to work to address.

The focus of the scheme on academic societies is supported by various research into sense of belonging in universities. An Inclusive Newcastle literature review investigating sense of belonging synthesised findings from across 15 studies and advocated for the understanding of students' sense of belonging being comprised of both 'social fit' and 'academic fit':

"Sense of belonging in the higher education world comprises of 'social fit' and 'academic/ability fit' (Lewis and Hodges, 2014). Students gauge their own sense of belonging in terms of 'social fit' based on how well they fit in socially by considering

social integration, engagement with peers, staff and campus activities, ability to build social networks and positive relationships with others at the university. 'Academic fit' goes beyond social interaction and considers how a student feels they fit into the academic environment in terms of their academic abilities, success and comparison to the perceived intellect, ability and behaviour of their peers. It is important that students feel they fit in both socially and academically, and both types of 'fit' should be regarded to be of equal importance to fostering a greater sense of belonging in the university." (Boulton, 2022)

Through this literature review and further consultation with students, the research suggests that the overlap between social fit and academic fit is a key site of belonging for students. The academic school is considered to exist in this overlap, where social fit and academic fit are co-located, and offers significant opportunities to develop a sense of belonging for students; anecdotal evidence from students suggests that they place significant importance on interactions with their academic school and peers within their discipline. This is supported by the influential *What works?* report from Thomas (2012), which argues that sense of belonging in higher education "is most effectively nurtured through mainstream activities with an overt academic purpose that all students participate in" (2012: 12). Thomas suggests that there is value in focusing on 'opt-out' strategies to ensure participation from a broader range of students, rather than only those who self-select, which aligns with NUSU's bid document reference to other existing similar schemes who used an 'opt-out' approach. This is the intention of the 6-week free membership element of the scheme, to invite "all course members" for free at the start of the academic year (NUSU bid, 2022) so they could participate in welcome events before deciding whether to continue their membership.

NUSU's most appropriate medium to promote this combination of social and academic fit is through academic societies, which are rooted in the academic school and the 'academic sphere' recommended by research to be beneficial for the development of sense of belonging for students.

## **2. Theory of Change**

Theory of Change is an approach to planning, implementing, or evaluating change. A Theory of Change shows what, how, and why something happened, and in which context. These are commonly used for complex interventions where direct causation between actions and outcomes can be difficult to see. This evaluation methodology aims to make clear the chain of events (or expected steps of change) between each component of an intervention, to improve confidence that outcomes can be linked back to actions taken. For the Academic Societies Funding Scheme, the key actions taken are a) providing funding for academic societies to host welcome events for students and b) providing students with 6 weeks of free membership to an academic society.

The process of developing a Theory of Change underpins the evaluation. For this project, the Evaluation Mentor and NUSU Academic Societies Intern co-created the initial Theory of Change to guide the evaluation and uncover key areas for data collection to answer evaluation questions about the effectiveness of the funding scheme.

To create the Theory of Change, the first step was to interview key NUSU stakeholders in the funding project to gather an understanding of their preconceptions and the general timeline of aspects involved in the funding process. From these interviews, the major events were picked out and each stakeholder's opinion on them was recorded, these informed the expected outcomes of the project and facilitated the Theory of Change development.

This Theory of Change is referred to throughout the evaluation report when discussing whether outcomes have been met or not. This facilitates learning and the identification of both best practice and areas for improvement in meeting expected outcomes.

A diagram or logic model can be used to develop ideas and demonstrate expected steps of change between inputs, activities, and expected outcomes. The logic model for this evaluation can be seen below:

PROJECT MISSION: To engage academic societies and collaborate with academic schools to offer welcome events for students + free 6 weeks of academic society membership to increase students' engagement with academic societies + increase students' sense of belonging academically and socially							
CONTEXT	INPUTS	ACTIVITIES	OUTPUTS	OUTCOMES		IMPACT	
<p><b>Student engagement in societies</b></p> <p>- Assuming that students want to engage with peers/societies/academic school. March 2022: 10,000 students involved in societies – demand is there but can be improved [from NUSU bid]</p> <p>- Impact of COVID-19 on student engagement in social activities &amp; committee experience of running events – increases need for welcome events + has challenges of engaging committees and members [from research e.g. McGivern 2022]</p> <p>- Similar models suggest funding student engagement in societies is beneficial – E.G. Participation Bursaries [from previous evaluations]</p>	<p>£20,000 funding from Newcastle University reserved for this scheme</p>	<p>£20,000 funding distributed among applicants for welcome events funding</p>	<p>Full amount of £20,000 spent across all successful applications</p>	<p>Majority of applications to be approved and funded (ST)</p>		<p>Increased awareness and demand from students for welcome events + free 6-week membership →</p>	<p>Continued expectations for the funding + expectations of its effectiveness</p>
	<p>Staff time and capacity to implement project, read applications and approve funding</p>	<p>Organisation + set-up of funding and application process: - Application forms designed and sent out to academic societies + - Surveys sent to academic schools - + to academic societies</p>		<p>Majority of academic societies to have applied for funding (~75%)</p>	<p>Increase in academic society paid memberships after initial 6 weeks (ST – MT)</p>		
<p>- Research suggests that many students are struggling with a lack of sense of belonging at university, and that this can affect mental health and wellbeing as well as academic outcomes [Boulton literature review]</p> <p>- Research shows that sense of belonging is critical for a positive student experience + that opt-out engagement strategies can be effective for improving sense of belonging [NUSU research; Boulton literature review; WonkHE]</p> <p>- Research suggests that students' sense of belonging needs both academic fit + social fit - found in academic schools. NUSU's most appropriate medium to increase sense of belonging then is through academic societies [Boulton literature review; Lewis &amp; Hodges, 2014]</p>	<p>Committee members awareness and time to understand the funding available, to apply for it and create event ideas, and to deliver events</p>	<p>Applications from committee members of academic societies</p>	<p>Responses from majority of academic societies to the survey sent out in December 2022 (~75%)</p>		<p>Students attend planned welcome events + have continued involvement in the society → (ST - MT)</p>	<p>Increased likelihood of more students to be inspired to join committee and apply for funding next time + increased committee-level awareness of funding, how it works in practice and how their events could be developed in future (MT-LT)</p>	<p>Committee members will learn from the application experience and will a. bring forward increasingly creative and innovative ideas and b. request more funding next time (MT-LT)</p>
		<p>Funded welcome events planned and delivered by academic societies</p>	<p>At least 1 funded welcome event from every successful application to be delivered within first 6 weeks (~75%) + for students to attend –</p>	<p>Funding to be spent on intended activities + the events to be delivered as planned + students attend (ST) + Students to be interested in the society and its events (ST)</p>	<p>Pay to join + continue to be involved + to form friendships and connections with other students (MT) + Increase in students' self-reported sense of belonging and community (to their school + to the society) (MT – LT)</p>	<p>Increased sense of belonging &amp; associated positive outcomes, ultimately cultivating a more inclusive university experience (LT)</p>	
<p>- Research suggests that students' sense of belonging needs both academic fit + social fit - found in academic schools. NUSU's most appropriate medium to increase sense of belonging then is through academic societies [Boulton literature review; Lewis &amp; Hodges, 2014]</p>	<p>6 weeks free membership for all students for academic societies</p>	<p>Creative and innovative ideas from societies taking advantage of the additional funding – table of events</p>	<p>Increased sense of belonging &amp; associated positive outcomes, ultimately cultivating a more inclusive university experience (LT)</p>	<p>Continued higher level of engagement in academic societies + more opportunities for students to connect with peers, improving sense of belonging in both academic + social fit (LT)</p>			
<p><b>School-society relationships</b></p> <p>- Level of understanding within the University + NUSU that school-student relationships could be improved, including improving support for academic societies from their school staff</p> <p>- NSS scores in the Learning Community category were consistently below-benchmark, suggesting there is work needed to improve community of staff and students in schools [NSS 2022]</p>	<p>Academic schools awareness and time to support their associated academic societies with applying and/or delivering/promoting events</p>	<p>Contributions from academic schools – collaboration, support, promotion</p>	<p>Self-reported involvement (reported by staff and students) in welcome events with academic societies</p>	<p>Increase in academic school involvement in societies (e.g. contributing own funding, promoting events, increased communication and staff involvement) (ST-MT)</p> <p>Increase in NSS scores in the Learning Community section and other relevant questions (LT)</p>	<p>Improved relationships between academic schools and academic societies (+ therefore, students)</p>		
<p><b>Role of evaluation</b></p> <p>Understanding that evaluation is important to underpin new projects and evaluate potential impact; additional context of increased focus on evaluation for inclusion in APPs</p>	<p>Evaluation capacity – to contribute to planned evaluation activities, requires staff time + knowledge</p>	<p>Evaluation and reporting planned and costed from early stages of project, to establish impact and make recommendations for future</p>	<p>Thorough evaluation and report of the funding scheme project, utilising Theory of Change</p>	<p>Evaluation report to be completed and highlight extent of success of project in meeting intended outcomes + to make recommendations for future (ST)</p>	<p>Ongoing evaluation of project to continue to measure impact over time</p>		



## **2.1 Data collection methods:**

Data collected throughout this report has been collected from:

- Applications sent into NUSU by committees between August- October 2022.
- A focus group made up of 4 society members in March 2023 run especially for this project.
- A Committee Survey created for this evaluation and distributed throughout December 2022 and January 2023
- A Committee survey based around the 6 weeks free membership sent out in March 2023 as a result of developing findings surrounding the knowledge of the 6 weeks free membership.
- A survey sent out to stage 1 reps to find students opinions on the funding scheme.
- A student survey for welcome events to discover what society members thought about the welcome events put on.
- Two surveys sent to committees and Schools by NUSU in April and May 2022 to discover initial ideas on what a 'sense of belonging' meant to people and finding out school relationships with societies.

These methods have been used to collect data to answer questions about whether the outcomes from the Theory of Change have been met or not. Each data collection method is referred to throughout the report.

## **3. Initial Thoughts and Expectations**

### **3.1 The Situation before the funding:**

Staff at NUSU explained that prior to this scheme, students were unable to try societies before buying a membership. This put students off joining over fears of having to pay for a society they would not attend, therefore impacting NUSU's aim of having a positive impact on the experience of 'every student'. This is especially relevant during the current cost of living crisis that is leaving less money for students to spend on extracurricular activities in favour of food and energy bills. Alongside this, smaller societies were struggling with lower funds which was impacting their ability to provide a range of effective and large welcome activities. Therefore, increasing funding for welcome events would help these societies.

### **3.2 Students' sense of belonging:**

The staff at NUSU recognised that the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted student life substantially, resulting in a lack of social activities since 2020 and impacted students' opportunity to socialise and participate in society events. Alongside this, students articulated during research conducted for the NUSU 2021 Strategic Plan that a sense of belonging was crucial to a positive student experience. Therefore, this funding was well received and predicted to be important for students.

### **3.3 Expectations for funding:**

NUSU staff were very pleased with the amount of funding provided (£20,000), however when analysed and broken down, they established that a maximum £500 would be available for each society. For larger societies, often from more popular academic subjects, it would

be difficult to stay within budget due to an increase in expected attendees and therefore need for bigger events. The staff at NUSU nevertheless expected that it would make a significant impact on students, increase students' engagement in academic societies and increase students' sense of belonging within academic societies.

### 3.4 Expectations for applications:

NUSU staff expected high levels of engagement as academic societies committees are passionate and involved, therefore more likely that they would take up the funding to help make their societies a more welcoming environment.

## 4. Application Processes

### 4.1 Patterns of Applications

- The majority of schools within the university had at least one applicant to the ASF scheme. This excludes the schools of Computing, Dentistry and Pharmacy. The average amount of funding allocated was £500, the recommended amount outlined in the application process.
- The most amount of funding was allocated to Newcastle Women's Medical Muslim Society which received £961.30, this was the last society to apply and asked NUSU for £500 to reimburse the events that had already been put on. NUSU, using their spare budget offered them more money for these events.
- NUSU also reached out to academic societies towards the end of the 6-weeks period to offer additional funding to support welcome events, which Politics responded to and received an additional £330, to create a total of £880.
- The School of Medical Education had the largest number of applicants with 16 societies given funding. These societies were also most responsive when asked for feedback.

This table shows the academic societies who were successful in their funding applications for the Academic Societies Funding Scheme, organised by Faculty and School.

Academic Society	Funding amount – applied for	Funding amount - approved
<b>Cross-faculty</b>		
Postgraduate Research Community	£500	£500
<b>Faculty of Medical Sciences (FMS)</b>		
<b>School of Medicine</b>		
Wilderness Medicine	£500	£500
Emergency Medicine	£250	£250
General Practice	£500	£500
Anaesthetics and Critical Care	£500	£500
Haematology, Oncology and Pathology	£350	£350
Academic Medicine Society	£350	£350

Surgical Society	£522	£522
Paediatrics Society	£500	£200
Anatomy	£470	£470
Lifestyle Medicine	£500	£500
Vascular Surgery	£200	£200
Neurological	£250	£500
Obstetrics and Gynaecology	£475	£475
Med-Tech Newcastle	£100	£100
Palliative Care	£100	£100
Newcastle Women's Medical Muslim Society	£500	£961.30
Psychiatry		£0
<b>School of Psychology</b>		
Psychology	£600	£400
<b>School of Biomedical, Nutritional, and Sports Sciences</b>		
Biomedical Sciences (Bio Sci)	£519.80	£0
<b>Faculty of Science, Agriculture &amp; Engineering (SAGe)</b>		
<b>School of Engineering</b>		
Engineering Projects	£500	£500
Civil Engineering and Geospatial	£500	£500
Mechanical Engineering	£500	£300
Electrical Engineering Society (ShockSoc)	£280	£250
Chemical Engineering Society	£500	£500
Marine Technology (WETSoc)	£500	£450
<b>School of Maths, Statistics and Physics</b>		
Maths	£450	£350
Physics		£0
Astronomy	£580.47	£580.47
<b>School of Natural and Environmental Sciences</b>		
Biology	£480	£80
<b>Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS)</b>		
<b>School of Arts and Cultures</b>		
Music	£470	£130
<b>School of History, Classics and Archaeology</b>		
Archaeology	£460	£460
History	£500	£300
<b>Newcastle Law School</b>		
Law	£500	£500
Bar	£500	£500
Mediation	£500	£430
<b>School X</b>		
Combined Honours	£500	£500
Philosophy	£250	£0
<b>School of Modern Languages</b>		

Modern Languages	£200	£200
<b>School of Architecture, Planning and Landscape</b>		
Architecture	£500	£75
<b>Newcastle University Business School</b>		
Economics	£500	£100
<b>School of Education, Communication and Language Sciences</b>		
Speech and Language Therapy	£426	£426
<b>School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics</b>		
English	£460	£340
<b>School of Geography, Politics, and Sociology</b>		
Geography	£800	£500
Politics	£880	£880

- 11 applications were not given funding and did not either attempt or have a successful resubmission. These societies provided a lack of detail in submissions and alcohol-centred events which did not coincide with NUSU's guidelines for the project. For example, Physics, Bio-Sci and Psychiatry were rejected and did not reapply with more suitable activities or funding requests.
- A selection of societies applied for funding that were not academic societies. This may have been due to the confusion after the definition of an academic society (see 4.4.2). Each of the following societies failed to provide a link with a corresponding academic school:

Ineligible societies who applied for the funding
<b>Lithuanian Society</b>
<b>Women's Social Sports Society</b>
<b>Anglo-Chinese Society</b>
<b>Turkish Society</b>
<b>Polish Society</b>
<b>Fashion Society</b>
<b>Afro-Caribbean Society</b>
<b>International Society</b>

## 4.2 What Worked?

During the data collection the evaluation, a survey created to help discover committees' thoughts opinions were after the events had been put on

funding had been allocated. There was a 59% reply rate with 24 out of 41 of academic societies taking part. Although it didn't hit the target of a 75% response rate set out initially in the Theory of Change, it was still a satisfactory response rate and for future evaluations, this could be increased with adjustments to survey design. The lower response rate than expected appears to be a result of timing as the survey was sent out in December 2022 and again in January 2023. This was close to the winter break and during exam weeks, impacting students' likelihood of responding.

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## EVALUATION IMPROVEMENT RECOMENDATION: Reform survey distribution timing

- An improvement for future evaluations of this project would be to begin to process earlier towards the end of October, this would mean welcome events were fresh in

committees' and students' minds and out of holidays and exam periods, hopefully leading to greater uptake.

- This would also prevent surveys being sent out over the winter break and exam period, resulting in increased cooperation and more time to talk directly to students.

#### **4.2.1 Committee application members felt supported.**

(Information collected from a society committee survey conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Sample: 24/41 approved applications).

- 75% of respondents said they **either agreed or strongly agreed** with the statement 'I felt supported through this application process'.
- 12.5% of respondents **disagreed** with the statement. (Obstetrics and Gynaecology, Architecture, Combined Honours)
- 12.5% of respondents selected **neither agree nor disagree**. (CEG, Maths, Geography)
- This indicated that the majority of applicants felt that NUSU gave enough support during the application period.
- Those societies that did not feel supported recommended that in the future they would like the opportunity to ask NUSU more questions during a Zoom Q and A and suggested integrating an introduction to the funding into committee training. (See recommendations in more detail below in section 4.4).

#### **4.2.2 The application process was easy.**

(Information collected from a society committee survey conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Sample: 24/41 approved applications).

##### **Majority of societies found the process easy:**

- 87.5% of respondents said they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement 'I found the application form process easy'.
- One response said they disagreed.
- 8.3% of respondents selected neither agree nor disagree.

##### **Some societies struggled with aspects:**

- 20.8% of respondents agreed that they struggled with some aspects.
- 70.8% of respondents either disagreed or strongly disagreed that they struggled.

Therefore, these answers give the indication that much of the application process was suitable, easy to access and did not cause people hassle.

- However, there were some respondents who struggled with the application process. As this survey was only sent to committees that had received funding, it could be the case that some societies may have been put off applying due to struggling with the application form.

#### **4.2.3 Applications were for the intended purpose.**

(Information collected from a society committee survey conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Sample: 24/41 approved applications).

In responses to the question ‘Why did you apply for the funding?’, committees appear to understand the goals of the scheme and their reasons for applying aligned with the expected outcomes of improving engagement and providing welcome events to increase students’ sense of belonging.

A selection of respondents' comments to the question ‘Why did you apply for the funding?’:

- **Money to support welcome events for new students:** - provide introductory events to tell new students about society and make new students feel more involved.
- **Improve social aspect of the society-** promote wellbeing as well as academics.
- Build back society after **COVID** (Combined Honours)
- **Increase engagement and grow membership.**
- **Increase further attendance.**

### **4.3 Aspects that didn’t work during the application process and corresponding recommendations.**

#### **4.3.1 Some applicants were unsure what activities were permitted using this funding.**

(Information collected from a society committee survey conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Sample: 24/41 approved applications).

- Multiple societies seemed to be unsure about what the funding was allowed for, resulting in several re-applications and confusion.
- Some applicants also expressed they were unaware of the detail required for their application to be successful.
  - Surgical Society: “clearer guidance on what is permitted under the funding, especially clear guidance on whether food/social events would be covered from the outset”.
  - Mediation Society: “I had to add more detail to my form after submitting it so maybe explaining the level of detail required such as locations would prevent this in the future”
  - Architecture and Combined Honours also wanted more explanation on what events were allowed.

#### **Guidance in the use of funding**

As seen above, there was some confusion about eligible welcome events and societies asked for guidance on what activities were or were not permitted to be subsidised through the funding. The following recommendations aim to resolve this confusion:

### **RECOMMENDATION 1: Short application guidance booklet/ information page**

- A solution to the confusion about eligible welcome events could be a **short application guidance booklet/information page** with rules NUSU expects the societies to follow and examples of events allowed. The information page should include an example of how much detail is required for the application and recommended word count for each section to help.
- Although **providing example events** may initially impact NUSU's aim of getting innovative ideas, it would simplify the application process for societies and help avoid the need for re-applications that take up both the committee's and NUSU's time. This would build committees confidence and as a result, lead to innovative and creative ideas.
- Due to the yearly turnaround of committees, the application process of this funding would be given in many cases to completely new people. Therefore, this introduction would help both introduce committees to this scheme and their role for the rest of the year.

### **RECOMMENDATION 2: Introduce a Zoom Q and A session.**

- Societies felt they had questions to ask during the application process, therefore an improvement that was suggested by the Economics Society in the 2022/23 Academic Society survey was the opportunity to have a Zoom Q and A session with NUSU to ask these.

### **RECOMMENDATION 3: Integrate information about the scheme into society committee training.**

- In order to clarify the application process and introduce new committee members to NUSU's rules, the scheme could be explained during committee training. This would also benefit NUS as there would be fewer re-applications due to ineligible activities suggested.
- The committee of the History Society stated that "It would have been helpful for the application process to coincide with committee training so that committees are aware of what socials are allowed or not prior to applying for funding".

#### **4.3.2 The term 'academic society'**

### **RECOMMENDATION 4: Define 'Academic Society' more clearly in information pages and application process to ensure students understand who the funding is for.**

During the collection of data for this report, there was some confusion over the term 'Academic Societies' and many students understood 'course-based' societies better. This was prevalent through the focus group run in March 2023. This term links with a problem outlined by Stacy Gillis from the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics (See section 6.1) whereby students are frequently thinking the society is run by the school. Therefore, the term academic societies is a better term to use to

prevent this confusion but could be better defined, both in the application process for committees, and for students when learning about the 6-week free membership. This would continue the integration of this term and increase students' awareness of it.

### 4.3.3 Timing for funding

There were several societies that applied for funding but did not receive it in time to put on events, and due to their size and limited funds could not afford to pay for the events themselves and then reimburse. The examples below demonstrate how some of the societies and their planned welcome events were affected by delayed funding: (The following Information collected from a society committee survey conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Sample: 24/41 approved applications).

- Civil Engineering and Geospatial Society: They felt as though they could not properly plan events and publicise them at the freshers' fair (Clubs and Societies Fair) due to not knowing a date, or how much money they were to receive and couldn't afford to run events and reimburse with the funding.
- Bar Society received funding after they had run and self-funded the events. They are unaware of the purpose of this funding and therefore have not yet spent it.

### RECOMMENDATION 5: Reform the funding timeline to ensure societies receive the funding in advance of the welcome events time period (September – October)

- This could be helped by promoting the funding at committee training and encouraging societies to apply earlier in order to prevent a build-up of responses and societies being unable to run events.

### 4.3.4 Money available

(Information collected from a society committee survey conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Sample: 24/41 approved applications).

- Societies during the survey asked for more money available as it would enable them to put on larger events and attract more people.
- Haematology, Oncology and Pathology Society said they would have liked to **use some of the funding for advertising** their event order to attract more people.
- Geography Society said, **“increase the amount available”**.
- Responses to the question “if you/ your society were to apply again, would you do anything differently?” linked to the desire for more funding:
- Geography Society replied: “More funding, more events”.
- WET Soc replied: “Ask for more funding- put on more activities during trips”.
- Societies wanting increased funds was an expected outcome of the project laid out in the Theory of Change, so this demand for more funding and committees planning more ambitious events shows the scheme has met this outcome successfully.



**RECOMMENDATION 6: Increase the funding available for the scheme, to enable committees to fund larger-scale events and reach more students.**

## 5. Welcome Events Delivery

### 5.1 What was in the plan?

As discovered through the society committee survey produced in December 2022, most committees who responded reported that they carried out the events outlined in their applications. If this was not the case, then similar events were done in place.

#### 5.1.1 Events carried out.

The table below shows a sample of society events mentioned in the application and the events described in the survey and checked via social media pages.

(Information collected from a society committee survey conducted between December 2022 and January 2023 Sample: 24/41 approved applications. This tables shows a sample of 12/24 of the respondents to the survey)

Society	Activity mentioned in application	Events put on
Surgical Soc	Welcome event: Two speakers followed by a social event for students to meet	Done - successful
	Careers road show – talks from local surgeons to allow for networking (yearly event)	Done- successful
	Surgical skills event	Focus group members mentioned this happened and it was useful to build relationships and provide an understanding of a career in surgery
Obstetrics and Gynaecology	Hot pod yoga	Done - successful (will plan another event for it later in the year)
	Tynemouth picnic trip (NUSU to help fund for students in financial hardship and food)	Not mentioned – said funding would be done in the new year – cake and coffee socials
	Bowling and quiz	Done- students from all year groups- lots of connections and chats
Haematology, Oncology and pathology	Social event – intro to society, quiz, food in a university provided room	Done- increased marketing would have increase attendance
	Intro to journal club event (pre-existing event)	Done- good session, more marketing needed
MedTech	Pizza welcome event	Innovation program mentioned instead

<b>Wilderness Medicine</b>	Freshers trip to the Lake District – games, teach first aid, open to all students from across the university	City orienteering- successful Our first trip (doesn't specify but can assume Lake District)
<b>Architecture (2<sup>nd</sup> application)</b>	Park picnic	No mention in survey of specific events but explains events for UG and PGR that allowed students to get to know one another
	Icebreaker evening	
	Master's evening	
	School social and night out	
	Mini society fair and charity bake sale	
	Games film and art night	
<b>Speech and Language therapy</b>	Pub quiz	Joint quiz with education society
	Diet education session	- Not mentioned
	DLD awareness day light up millennium bridge (Developmental Language Disorder Day) and flyers	Event completed - lots of members attended.  Makaton taster session – positive feedback on it
<b>Emergency Medicine</b>	2 Trauma patient demonstration with pizza after	Successful – allowed for more realistic situations than had ever done before and lots of students attended
<b>Paediatrics Society</b>	Guest lecturer to talk about careers in paediatrics (refreshments and food provided)	Successful
	Freshers social – hire venue	No mention
	Handouts to help students gain a mentor working in paediatrics	
	Key terminology canvas work	No mention
<b>Maths</b>	Printing and materials for fresher's fair	No feedback on any point
	Bar crawl social	
	Crazy golf and bowling	
	Pottery painting group – welfare group	
<b>Geography</b>	Ice skating	None of the events listed in application, in survey only state dog cafe
	Bowling	
	Posters for events- using recycled paper company	
	Geography focuses careers fair	
	Guest speakers	

This table shows that many of the events outlined in the applications did take place, and if not, other welcome events took part. This could be for numerous reasons unique to circumstances and changing society needs. This process however could be helped by following up on the recommendation of introducing the scheme during committee training and providing examples of events in an information booklet. The execution of these events meets the Theory of Change expected outcome that students attended

planned welcome events, and that in many cases at least one event from each successful application has been delivered in the first 6 weeks.

#### **Frequently run events.**

The most frequently run events were bowling, free pizza events, career talks and coffee mornings. This was because societies believed these were events that would draw people with similar interests, increasing friendships made and quicker development of a sense of belonging within their society community.

## **5.2 Recommendations for welcome events**

### **RECOMMENDATION 7: Continue to encourage events that bring together year groups.**

- Many of the events described by the societies have expressed connections between year groups and how helpful this has been in increasing a sense of belonging.
- Therefore, this would be a recommended area to further express during the rolling out of this scheme again.

## **6. The Outcomes of the Academic Societies Funding Scheme**

### **6.1 Were improved relationships between academic schools and academic societies achieved?**

One of the key areas of expected outcomes and impacts of the scheme, which surfaced in the Theory of Change, was school-society relationships. The Theory of Change expected to see self-reported involvement by staff and students in engaging with welcome events, an increase in academic school involvement in societies, and ultimately improved relationships between academic schools and academic societies.

To evaluate whether these outcomes were achieved, data was collected from committee members and some staff members representing individual schools.

#### **6.1.1 Committee View:**

During a 2022/23 Committee survey, committee members were asked if their society was able to develop a closer relationship with their school as a result of the funding.

The result of this was mixed with 45% of respondents answering, 'neither agree nor disagree'. Within this sector, there were varied connotations of the term with half suggesting their relationship was already good and therefore did not need to be improved, and others that did not try to create or improve a relationship due to no existing links.

Out of the total responses, schools from the SAgE (Science, Agriculture and Engineering) Faculty had the most 'strongly disagree' or 'disagree' results with 3/4 of the responses being from there. Therefore, this is a key set of schools to focus on for social engagement and involvement in any NUSU project as it appears that there may not be strong relationships between academic societies and schools in SAgE.

A good example of using funding to improve a school relationship:

- Mediation Society – This Society already had a good relationship, however, used this funding as a chance to further it and invite staff to their welcome pizza event.

### **6.1.2 School View**

To gather staff perspectives on the scheme and their opinion on relationships between schools and societies, an interview was carried out with Stacy Gillis from the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics.

Her opinion was that school-society relationships are a “two-way process”; both need to put in the effort to coordinate events, get to know each other and build a trusting connection. Stacy explained that the regular changeover of committees has had an impact on this as some do not wish to build this connection, therefore, each year she is unaware of the relationship the society wants to build. Stacy believes that from her experience society's desire to build a relationship is the key element to getting the school involved, if the committee puts effort into curating a good connection, then she wants to help and get more involved.

However, Stacy believes the school's place in relativity to the academic society needs to be clearly outlined to students. She is frequently contacted by students wanting information about society matters and issuing complains. Therefore, although she wants the school to work with the society, she believed this should overstep the mark to make students think the society is a school-run program.

When asked about the Academic Societies Funding Scheme, Stacy was not aware of it. Linking back to the Theory of Change, an expected outcome was that the scheme would improve school-society relationships; this case study on the School of English, suggests that this outcome hasn't yet been met as some schools reported limited awareness. Therefore, this is a point to work on future roll outs of the funding and has the potential to further improve the benefit felt by students.

### **6.1.3 School and Society Relationships:**

The following table combines three questionnaires sent out before and after the funding had been allocated and used. The selected case studies are chosen due to them replying to each questionnaire sent out, allowing for a pattern to be tracked across.

- School opinions (first column) are taken from a questionnaire sent out by NUSU to schools in April 2022 before the funding applications had been sent out (4 school replies)
- Committee questionnaire responses (middle column) are taken from a questionnaire sent out to committees by NUSU in May 2022 before the funding applications had been sent out (19 replies)
- Corresponding society responses are taken from a survey sent out to committees between December 2022 and January 2023, after the funding period (24/41 approved application replies)

School opinions on their relationship with societies based in their schools	Committee questionnaire by NUSU (May 2022 response)	Corresponding society response from evaluation's committee survey (December 2022- January 2023)
<p><b>Newcastle University Business School (NUBS)</b> The Business school allows all of the societies which link to the school to add posts to their student blog and promote themselves during induction week on Canvas. They also said that they are aware of Economics society in particular as they have strong links with a number of staff members. The school as a whole has provided funding when asked in the past.</p>	<p>Economics “We have a working relationship with some academic staff. Every so often we try to include faculty from economics to help ignite academic debate and enrich the academic experience of our members.” – 2021/22 Welfare Officer</p>	<p>Economics- Society already has a good school relationship.</p>
<p><b>School of Engineering</b> The education and events teams are in regular contact with the societies and staff members within the school and the degree directors attend events put on by the committees. The school aims to provide more funding to societies over the coming years</p>	<p>“We have a good relationship with the school of engineering. In particular, Jean Hall has been our primary point of contact with whom we have regular meetings to update on any societal news”- 2021-22 Secretary</p> <p>“We ask for funding towards bridging the FS1 gap as it is not easy for a small society to fun such things. We also ask for funding from the school for educational trips.” – 2021-22 Treasurer.</p>	<p>CEG-soc- Did not involve the school because they thought it was a NUSU scheme.</p> <p>WET-soc- Already have a particularly good relationship with their school</p>

	<p>“Relationship with the staff is fantastic, with Kayvan Pazouki and Maryam Haroutunian offering significant support both with contacts, planning and financial support from the school. As well as the contacts with the North East Coast Joint Branch which student reps are voted onto the committee allowing further industrial contacts with Alan Murphy being the main university contact.” – 2021/22 President</p>	
<p><b>Combined Honours</b> The school regularly promotes events and staff members attend the summer and winter balls planned by the society. The school also offers group space for members to meet, and staff take part in their events to meet.</p>	<p>No response provided to this questionnaire</p>	<p>Combined Honours – no information provided.</p>

The table above shows schools and the committees of 2021/22 and 2022/23 opinions on their relationship. The examples provided show a positive response with opinions tracking across each questionnaire, presenting that schools and societies have similar views on the topic. Economic Society appears to have a strong connection that the Business School staff also commented upon, showing that it is a stand-out case within the Newcastle University Business School. WETsoc and CEG Soc both have good and continued relationships with their school showing that some committees pursue previous years' efforts to involve the school in events and ask for funding from them. Combined Honours' school implies a positive relationship however the committee have not provided any more information therefore it is hard to see a trend in this case or to see if students agree that there is a positive relationship.

**EVALUATION IMPROVEMENT RECOMMENDATION:** Revise wording of this survey question.

Question 9 of the committee survey sent out in December 2022- January 2023 appeared to cause some confusion (See pie chart below). Societies with strong relationships outlined in the following question 10 (“Please provide more information about your changing/not changing relationship with your school as a result of the funding”), answered with a broad range of responses due to a misunderstanding of the wording of the question. Therefore, in further evaluations it is suggested this question would be split into two for clarification. The

first would ask about the society's relationship with the school on a scale before the funding, and the second for the relationship after the funding period. This would stop the miscommunication and lack of dependency upon written comments to understand why committees had answered this in a particular way.

9. I believe that my society was able to develop a closer relationship with my associated school as a result of this funding.

[More Details](#)

● Strongly Disagree	1
● Disagree	3
● Neither Agree or Disagree	11
● Agree	6
● Strongly Agree	3



The anticipated outcome, as shown in the Theory of Change, of increased relationships between schools and societies is an area that has not met all the expected outcomes. The lack of awareness has prevented outcomes being met, as the key input of awareness of the scheme has not translated well enough with schools. Therefore, recommendations have been provided to improve this and meet outcomes next time.

### RECOMMENDATION 8: Encouragement of school engagement to develop relationship between school and academic society.

- There was a lack of school participation seen across the applications and events carried out. Referring to Stacy Gillis from the School of English's lack of knowledge of the scheme, a first step in getting schools involved is to create a higher awareness of the scheme from them. This would get more schools involved in society events and possibly influence them to provide some extra funding to help the welcome process.
- This funding could also be introduced to schools with no current relationships with their academic societies as a chance to develop one and be a building block to further collaboration.

## 6.2 Has there been an increase in academic society memberships?

- (Information collected from a society committee survey conducted between December 2022 and January 2023. Sample: 24/41 approved applications).
- The committee survey shows that 70% of committees who responded (24 out of 41) believe their membership numbers have increased as a result of the funding.
- Although numerical data on society numbers for this year is not yet available, this suggests a positive trend in the committee's perception of increased membership.

13. I believe that welcome events boosted my societies membership numbers.

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

● Strongly Disagree	2
● Disagree	1
● Neither Agree or Disagree	4
● Agree	10
● Strongly Agree	7



## EVALUATION IMPROVEMENT RECCOMEDATION: Assess membership data when it becomes available.

- 70% (17/24) either 'Strongly agreed' or 'agreed' that their membership number increased believed they did.
- 17% (4/24) did not know, this could be due to them not knowing information about last year's membership numbers, or it being at early to tell if there is an increase.

### RECOMMENDATION 9: Create a way to track membership levels for the future.

- To track membership levels, the student focus group held in March 2023 said that if they could have signed up for a society mailing group in order to receive regular updates on events they would have done so. This could be a possible way to track changes in membership levels over the first 6 weeks and help students.

## 6.3 Has there been an increase in students' sense of belonging?

One of the key areas of expected outcomes and impacts of the scheme, which surfaced in the Theory of Change, was an increase in students' sense of belonging. The Theory of Change is expected to see students joining academic societies and forming friendships and connections with other students, an increase in students' self-reported sense of belonging and community to their school and society, and increased academic outcomes associated with a stronger sense of belonging.

To evaluate whether these outcomes were achieved, data was collected from students.

Committee survey results show that the committees understood this core goal. When asked '**Why do you think your society has become a better place?**', the most common answers were:

- Obstetrics and Gynaecology- It helped "boost the social profile of NUGOS and **connect members from across the year groups**" in the Medical School.
- CEGsoc- The funding allowed members to integrate and "**feel involved, therefore developing a sense of community within the society**". The introduction period for new students in the society sped up the student's ability to feel a sense of belonging within the society.
- **Increased membership:** More people have been able to be involved in the events, therefore building more relationships between the new members and existing members.
  - Mediation Society- Have increased membership and as a result, events since have been well attended.



- Society for Anaesthetics and Critical Care- “This year we got the chance to increase membership numbers and get to know them socially as part of the society”, this improved on previous committees’ inaction.
- **Provided a welcoming space** where people “felt comfortable attending alone.”
- The funding allowed **more events to be put on with more people attending**, increasing engagement. “We were able to host more events for more people which meant higher engagement and therefore more friendly relationship got a chance to form.”

The December 2022-January 2023 committee survey also asked the question “**Do you feel like your events achieved goals of improving a sense of belonging and community for the students who attended? Why or why not?**” See below for a sample of responses to this question:

Society	Do you feel like your events achieved goals of improving a sense of belonging and community for the students who attended? Why or why not?
Obstetrics and Gynaecology	"Yes - we made sure to have <b>committee reps</b> so that the events could be facilitated, and <b>students could mix within themselves and with committee</b> . We had a <b>few students come to all our events</b> which I believe illustrated their success as <b>people returned!</b> "
Speech and Language Therapy	"Yes! Our members had <b>multiple opportunities to bond with their peers across the year groups</b> of the SLT degree and outside of this degree. This <b>created a welcoming and warm community full of people</b> with alike interests and engaging in the same activities."
Postgraduate Research Community	"Yes, definitely. <b>We could reach a wider group of people because of the funding</b> and postgraduate students ranging from Master’s to late-stage PhD students attended."

Using the above data to assess whether the expected outcomes laid out in the Theory of Change have been met, our sample suggests that the funding received has been associated with the creation of a sense of belonging within academic societies, particularly from the perspective of academic society committees. This is a positive outcome from the first year of the funding and continuing the scheme would provide more evidence to support this due to increased awareness and confidence built by societies from developing experience with using the funding.

To say this expectation has been fully met, more data would still be needed from student members of societies highlighting the friendship and connections forged as a result of the funding. Seeing ‘increased academic outcomes associated with a stronger sense of belonging’ is a longer-term outcome that is not visible yet due to the longevity it requires to be assessed fully. This also links to the expected long-term outcome in the increase in the National student survey (NSS) scored in the Learning community section.

## 6.4 Did students hear about the funding and 6 weeks free membership program?

Through the evaluation, the main problem area that has arisen within the scheme, was the lack of knowledge of the 6-week free membership for academic societies. When asked during a focus group in March 2023 made up of four students, and 2 small scale student-focused surveys (4 replies from Stage 1 reps and 6 responses from student members in societies) 90% of students had not heard about the free memberships. Additionally, societies were still encouraging students to purchase memberships across their Instagram pages. The Theory of Change does not explicitly mention the awareness level of the 6-week free membership due to an expectation that committees and students would know about this as part of the funding application process. However, evidence shows that this was not the case.

This appeared to be for 2 reasons:

1. Societies worrying about a lack of memberships in the first 6 weeks impacting their funding for the year. This to a change made last year of how funding is distributed. It is now the amount of paid members by the end of the previous academic year, some committees appear not to have known about this.
2. Lack of society committee awareness of the scheme

### **RECOMMENDATION 10: Change in expression of 6 weeks free membership.**

#### For Students:

During a focus group (4 student members) held in March 2023, students were asked what the best way would have been to tell them about the 6-week free membership. The students that attended were from a range of stages and believed different methods should be used for year groups. For example:

**Stage 1:** Students believed that the Clubs and Societies fair held in September would be best to communicate the idea. All the group had attended this fair during their induction week, and it is an event the majority of students attend, therefore making it an effective way to communicate the 6-week free membership to academic societies message.

**Stage 2+:** The Library, Study spaces in buildings, society Instagram pages as during the same focus group students in these stages did not attend the society fairs.

#### For societies:

During the committee training, the changes in funding methods should be communicated and linked to this funding to avoid any confusion and lack of society promotion of the 6-week free membership. Societies could also be recommended or encouraged to promote this membership; this would help increase knowledge of the scheme for students.

## 6.5 Would societies apply again?

An expected outcome and impact of the scheme was that there would be continuing interest from students for the scheme and committees would apply again. In the committee survey, when asked if they “would apply/encourage the application to this fund again for the 2023/24 academic year”, a strong proportion of respondents strongly agreed (66%) and overall, 92% said they would reapply. This shows that there is demand for this funding again. The Theory of Change laid out a longer-term impact of increased awareness and demand from students and committees leading to an understanding of its effectiveness. For this to be discovered, the funding scheme needs to be repeated to discover this longer-term impact. This evaluation shows a positive result from the first year of the scheme. It demonstrates the funding was especially important to societies, and they believed it has impacted them and their welcome activities in a positive way. This links to the Theory of Change outcome that the funding would be well received and have the demand to be run again.

15. I would apply / encourage the application to this fund again for the 2023/24 academic year.

[More Details](#)

[Insights](#)

Strongly Disagree	0
Disagree	0
Neither Agree or Disagree	2
Agree	6
Strongly Agree	16



### RECOMMENDATION 11: Continue the Academic Societies Funding Scheme due to the clear interest shown.

- The majority of committees strongly agreed that they would apply again, and no committees said they did not wish to. Therefore, this shows a demand for the funding to run again and want for committees to make their societies a more welcoming place at the start of the term.
- Running this funding again would allow a sense of belonging to increase as committees could build upon this initial year’s foundations and create improved events with some experience indicating which events worked well for them and how to improve. This would likely begin to more strongly meet the expected outcomes and impact of societies suggesting more creative and innovative ideas, as they gain confidence and knowledge over time.

## 7. Case Study: Surgical Society

Surgical Society was the most responsive to the surveys, focus groups and data collection surrounding this report. This is a summary of the events and processes that took place.

- Surgical Society applied for £552, and their application was reviewed on 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2022

- In their application, they aspired to carry out the following:
  - Welcome Event talk.
  - Careers roadshow
  - Surgical Skills event
- All of these events took place.
- Two Surgical Society members that took part in a focus group in March 2023 explained how useful these events were in bringing together students from across year groups, creating an environment in which people felt comfortable talking to each other and helping medical students understand careers in surgery.
- As a result, these members made friends across year groups and attended regular social events after this welcome period.
- This shows welcome events generated a sense of belonging within the society as members felt comfortable to return and make friends through social events. (Meeting a key expected outcome of the evaluation's Theory of Change).
- The two students believed on a scale from 1 to 10 that the importance of being a part of their academic society was a 7.
- They also said that the society has exceeded the expectations they held about their academic society before attending university due to the number of events they held and the cross-country links with medical professionals.
- Therefore, we can see that academic societies play a significant role in university life and therefore need to be safe environments where people can create friendships and feel a part of.

### **EVALUATION IMPROVEMENT RECCOMENDATION: gather more responses from students within societies.**

As a result of unfortunate timing discussed in section 4.2, there was limited uptake from students within these societies in surveys and focus groups. The next time evaluation is completed it is recommended that student opinions are the first thing to be collected, leading to more time to redistribute surveys and an increased opportunity to gather these responses.

## **8. Conclusion**

This evaluation has looked at the effectiveness of the Academic Societies Funding scheme for the 2022/23 academic year. The evaluation shows that the funding has contributed to a number of successful outcomes, with considerable progress made in increasing students' engagement with academic societies and increasing students' sense of belonging academically and socially. An increased sense of belonging is developing in societies according to the committees and students attended welcome events carried out using the funding. The scheme has also been effective in the eyes of the committees as they would re-apply again and have suggested improvements they would make to their events. In future evaluations, it would be useful to hear from more student members and new students, as this evaluation lacked student responses, so it is not possible to fully establish how far members agreed with the committee's perspective.

The expected outcomes which were not as adequately met, were the knowledge of the free 6 weeks membership for new students, and the building of a relationship between societies and their corresponding schools. However, with the continuation of this scheme these can be met and by implementing the suggested recommendations made throughout this report we would expect these outcomes to be met more successfully in future. The progress made in the first year of this scheme is positive and shows that NUSU's concept of increasing a sense of belonging within its Academic society's is valid, and that it is important for students within the university to be given the chance to discover they feel a sense of belonging.

## 9. Complete list of recommendations made throughout the report.

### RECOMMENDATION 1: Short application guidance booklet/ information page

- A solution to the confusion about eligible welcome events could be a **short application guidance booklet/information page** with rules NUSU expects the societies to follow and examples of events allowed. The information page should include an example of how much detail is required for the application and recommended word count for each section to help.
- Although **providing example events** may initially impact NUSU's aim of getting innovative ideas, it would simplify the application process for societies and help avoid the need for re-applications that take up both the committee's and NUSU's time. This would build committees confidence and as a result, lead to innovative and creative ideas.
- Due to the yearly turnaround of committees, the application process of this funding would be given in many cases to completely new people. Therefore, this introduction would help both introduce committees to this scheme and their role for the rest of the year.

### RECOMMENDATION 2: Introduce a Zoom Q and A session.

- Societies felt they had questions to ask during the application process, therefore an improvement that was suggested by the Economics Society in the 2022/23 Academic Society survey was the opportunity to have a Zoom Q and A session with NUSU to ask these.

### RECOMMENDATION 3: Integrate information about the scheme into society committee training.

- In order to clarify the application process and introduce new committee members to NUSU's rules, the scheme could be explained during committee training. This would also benefit NUS as there would be fewer re-applications due to ineligible activities suggested.
- The committee of the History Society stated that "It would have been helpful for the application process to coincide with committee training so that committees are aware of what socials are allowed or not prior to applying for funding".

**RECOMMENDATION 4: Define ‘Academic Society’ more clearly in information pages and application process to ensure students understand who the funding is for.**

- During the collection of data for this report, there was some confusion over the term ‘Academic Societies’ and many students understood ‘course-based’ societies better. This was prevalent through the focus group run in March 2023. This term links with a problem outlined by Stacy Gillis from the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics (See section 6.1) whereby students are frequently thinking the society is run by the school. Therefore, the term academic societies are a better term to use to prevent this confusion but could be better defined, both in the application process for committees, and for students when learning about the 6-week free membership. This would continue the integration of this term and increase students' awareness of it.

**RECOMMENDATION 5: Reform the funding timeline to ensure societies receive the funding in advance of the welcome events time period (September – October)**

- This could be helped by promoting the funding at committee training and encouraging societies to apply earlier in order to prevent a build-up of responses and societies being unable to run events.

**RECOMMENDATION 6: Increase the funding available for the scheme, to enable committees to fund larger-scale events and reach more students.**

**RECOMMENDATION 7: Continue to encourage events that bring together year groups.**

- Many of the events described by the societies have expressed connections between year groups and how helpful this has been in increasing a sense of belonging.
- Therefore, this would be a recommended area to further express during the rolling out of this scheme again.

**RECOMMENDATION 8: Encouragement of school engagement to develop relationship between school and academic society.**

- There was a lack of school participation seen across the applications and events carried out. Referring to Stacy Gillis from the School of English’s lack of knowledge of the scheme, a first step in getting schools involved is to create a higher awareness of the scheme from them. This would get more schools involved in society events and possibly influence them to provide some extra funding to help the welcome process.
- This funding could also be introduced to schools with no current relationships with their academic societies as a chance to develop one and be a building block to further collaboration.

### **RECOMMENDATION 9: Create a way to track membership levels for the future.**

- To track membership levels, the student focus group held in March 2023 said that if they could have signed up for a society mailing group in order to receive regular updates on events they would have done so. This could be a possible way to track changes in membership levels over the first 6 weeks and help students.

### **RECOMMENDATION 10: Change in expression of 6 weeks free membership.**

- **Stage 1:** Students believed that the Clubs and Societies fair held in September would be best to communicate the idea. All the group had attended this fair during their induction week, and it is an event the majority of students attend, therefore making it an effective way to communicate the 6-week free membership to academic societies message.
- **Stage 2+:** The Library, Study spaces in buildings, society Instagram pages as during the same focus group students in these stages did not attend the society fairs.
- **For societies:** During the committee training, the changes in funding methods should be communicated and linked to this funding to avoid any confusion and lack of society promotion of the 6-week free membership. Societies could also be recommended or encouraged to promote this membership; this would help increase knowledge of the scheme for students.

### **RECOMMENDATION 11: Continue the Academic Societies Funding Scheme due to the clear interest shown.**

- The majority of committees strongly agreed that they would apply again, and no committees said they did not wish to. Therefore, this shows a demand for the funding to run again and want for committees to make their societies a more welcoming place at the start of the term.
- Running this funding again would allow a sense of belonging to increase as committees could build upon this initial year's foundations and create bigger and better events with some experience indicating which events worked well for them and how to improve. This would likely begin to more strongly meet the expected outcomes and impact of societies suggesting more creative and innovative ideas, as they gain confidence and knowledge over time.

## **References**

Boulton, C. (2022) *Literature Review: Sense of Belonging and Community in Higher Education*. Inclusive Newcastle Knowledge Centre.

Laing, K. and Todd, L. (eds.) (2015) *Theory Theory-based Methodology: Using theories of change for development, research and evaluation*. Research Centre for Learning and Teaching, Newcastle University.

Lewis, K. and Hodges, S. (2014) 'Expanding the concept of belonging in academic domains: Development and validation of the Ability Uncertainty Scale', *Learning and Individual Differences*, 37, pp. 197-202. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.lindif.2014.12.002>

Thomas, L. (2012) *Building student engagement and belonging in Higher Education at a time of change: final report from the What Works? Student Retention & Success programme*. Available at: <https://www.advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/building-student-engagement-and-belonging-higher-education-time-change-final-report>

## **Appendix**

The full appendix for the evaluation report can be accessed via the links underneath each survey heading. The appendix contains the following survey questionnaires and spreadsheets of responses received:

### **Committee Survey December 2022- January 2023**

[Society promotion of 6 weeks free membership.xlsx](#)

(24/41 approved applications responded)

1. Which academic society did you apply for this funding for?
2. What school is your academic society associated with?
3. I felt supported through this application process. (Answer on a scale)
4. I found the application form process easy. (Answer on a scale)
5. I struggled with aspects of the application process. ((Answer on a scale))
6. What improvements would you make to the application process?
7. Why did you apply for the funding?
8. I believe the funding received was enough to provide welcome events and create a sense of belonging within my society.
9. I believe that my society was able to develop a closer relationship with my associated school as a result of this funding.
10. Please provide more information about your changing/not changing relationship with your school as a result of the funding.
11. I believe the funding has made my society a better place for students.
12. Please explain why you think your society has become a better place.
13. I believe that welcome events boosted my societies membership numbers.
14. Was the funding a help or more of a hindrance to your start of term?
15. I would apply / encourage the application to this fund again for the 2023/24 academic year.
16. Please tell us about the events and activities you used the funding for, and if you thought they went successfully or could have been improved.



17. Do you feel like your events achieved goals of improving a sense of belonging and community for the students who attended? Why or why not?
18. If you/your society were to apply again, would you do anything differently? (e.g., Would you plan different kinds of events or ask for more/less funding?)

### **Committee survey for 6 weeks free membership**

[Society promotion of 6 weeks free membership.xlsx](#)

(4 responses out of the 24 it was sent to (sent to committees that had completed the December to January survey). Small scale however answers correlate and from an array of schools and faculties.)

1. What society are you from?
2. Did you publicise the 6 weeks free membership new members to your society could have during September and October 2022?
3. How much did you promote the 6 weeks free membership? (How did you promote it?)
4. If you didn't promote it, why?
5. Did you presume that the free membership would impact the amount of funding you gained from the Students Union for the year?

### **Stage 1 rep survey for welcome events**

[Stage 1 Rep survey.xlsx](#)

(4 responses out of 9 emailed. Follow up emails sent to each non-responded person, but no further responses received)

1. Did you know that during the first 6 weeks of term you were allowed 6 weeks free membership to academic societies?
2. If so, how did you find out about it? / If not, how would you have wanted to know about it?
3. Did you attend any academic society welcome events?
4. If so, what were the best events you attended and why?
5. Are you now a part of an academic society, if so which one/s?
6. Did any welcome events provided help you feel like you belong within the society and/or improve your induction period and first semester?
7. Do you have any improvements to suggest to this funding/welcome events? - e.g., student awareness, different events,

### **Student survey for welcome events**

[Society members survey on welcome events](#)

(6 responses received, however all from Surgical society, therefore not a wide enough variety of societies to provide a through answer)

1. What is your name?
2. What academic society/societies are you a member of?
3. What stage of your degree are you in?
4. Did you know about the 6 weeks free academic society membership in September (for new students to the society)
5. What welcome events did you attend for your society?

6. What welcome events would you have liked to partake in? - please list events that either were not provided, or ones you did attend and really liked
7. Did you make friends or talk to people in other years at your society's events?
8. Have you continued to be involved with your academic society?
9. Have you made friends through your academic society? - please provide some information about how
10. Did/do you feel a sense of belonging within your academic society.
11. What do you believe to be a sense of belonging? (Please provide some key words)

**Committee and School April/May questions asked by NUSU.**

Committees: [Copy of Academic Societies - Committee 2022-05-20 04 06 33.xlsx](#)

School: [Copy of Academic Societies - Schools Su2022-05-20 04 06 52.xlsx](#)