

LSE SU Polish Business Society:
Research Unit Report

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Key Findings and Recommendations of the Research Unit

How do we engage?

Looking at the involvement of Polish students in student societies at universities in Poland and the UK.



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Key Findings and Recommendations of the Research Unit

This section summarises the conclusions of our comparative research study. Some of these conclusions take the form of recommendations. The recommendations are directed at educational policymakers, university faculties, student societies' leaders, and students themselves. The first part of the summary applies universally to both the UK and Poland, and in the following sections we focus on the specific conclusions and recommendations for each country individually.

Universal

- The main reason why students are strongly involved in the activities of student societies both in Poland and Great Britain is the opportunity to meet new people, join existing student communities and create new ones.
- An important aspect of participation in student societies, both in Poland and the UK, is the chance to develop personally, gain new skills and knowledge.
- Apart from purposeful activities, student societies benefit from organising informal events, where members can freely socialise, getting to know one another outside of formal and structured meetings.
- Student societies benefit from clear and transparent hierarchies. The division of roles motivates action and development opportunities and allows students to pursue their interests in the area of the activity that engages them the most. It is important that the management board of the society has a democratic mandate and is transparently elected.
- A well-funded student society increases students' motivation to act and its accessibility, allowing students to become involved in more ambitious and demanding projects as well as for the societies to have cheaper or free membership. Our interviews indicate that funding is an important aspect, positively contributing to student's engagement. Yet, it is important that the members of the society know how to use the funds allocated efficiently and in a transparent way.
- Active presence of societies on social media and university websites is essential to maintaining and strengthening involvement in student societies, by making them accessible and inclusive.

- Students pointed out a lack of equal representation within managerial roles in the student societies. However, the majority of students did not believe that it did not arise from an internal discrimination present in their student societies, but rather thought that the lack of representation was a reflection of inequality within given areas in the wider society.
- The life of many universities in Great Britain seems to revolve around student societies, and for Polish students, they are an opportunity to build a sense of community in a new environment. An important aspect of that is participating in Polish student societies.
- For both students in Poland and the UK, COVID-19 pandemic and its current aftermath severely limited the activities of study societies. The problem particularly affected first and second-year students, as they are the ones most often involved in associations and were exposed to Covid restrictions since the beginning of their studies. Even though the restrictions related to COVID-19 are mostly gone by now, the disruption of the first part of university education of students has determined their engagement in further years of study.
- Our research found that there often was a gender inequality in the managerial roles of many student societies. However, students often commented that these inequalities may not result from exogenous factors or mechanisms within the student societies
- but are a reflection and reinforcement of gender inequalities present in the society at large. Yet, it is important to note that students both in our survey and interviews did identify gender inequalities within their student societies, which should be considered when designing structures, roles, and representation within student societies in the future.

United Kingdom

- Students in the UK are more likely to be actively involved in student societies, take more responsibility within them, and devote more time to them.
- Polish students in the UK particularly benefit from the wide range of student societies existing at their campuses, which allow and incentivise them to develop a holistic student profile, and take on new interests and hobbies.
- Career development and networking is a significant motivation for student society engagement in the UK. Through career-oriented societies Polish students gain insight into the career paths that interest them. A crucial aspect of Polish students' participation in these societies is the ability to participate in large projects, events, organise panels or conferences. For many, these provide the first opportunity to gain first career-relevant work experience, skills or receive direct job or internship offers.
- In the UK, students largely benefit from the institutionalisation of student societies at the university level, understood as support through the Student Union, funding from university, provision of facilities and engagement of faculty in their projects. However, we have also found that an overly strong institutionalisation may lead to inefficiencies.
- In the UK, the number of student societies sometimes exceeds the capacity of the governing body - the Student Union. Students indicate that there is a need for a review of this body, simplification of the procedures that student societies must meet to receive funding, permission to use university infrastructure, or organise an event.
- Students pointed to the high cost of membership in some associations. The problem is mainly related to sport societies and is more pronounced in universities located outside London. To increase participation and inclusive access, universities should ensure the lowest possible cost of functioning of student associations by, among others, making their classrooms, sports spaces, or equipment available.
- Polish student societies in the UK play a significant role in Polish students' engagement. Socially, they create communities for students, continue traditions and

promote Polish culture abroad. They also provide an important connection for students to their home country in terms of creating a network, career connections, and securing a professional future in Poland.

Poland

- Students in Poland see societies as an opportunity to deepen their knowledge on studied courses and allow them to implement the theoretical knowledge gained during the classes in practice (which is often not possible by the course of studies itself).
- For students in Poland, the involvement in student societies is an opportunity to leave their 'departmental or friendship bubbles', as often they spend most of their studies in a narrow, closed social-circle with limited opportunities to meet people from other groups and faculties.
- Students in Poland often decide to join student society out of curiosity, to learn about its activities, and see how it works. This shows that students want additional participation and want to engage in extracurricular activities but may not have a sufficient choice of student societies or are not aware of their activities.
- The most frequently indicated problem in the extracurricular involvement indicated by students in Poland was the lack of sufficient promotion of student societies by the university. The university should promote them in a centralised and widely accessible digital platform, and on the university premises by organising student society fairs or similar promotion events.
- The second biggest problem regarding student's engagement in Poland is a lack of initiatives which students find interesting, resulting from a limited offer of available options. This is related to, inter alia, a strict academic focus of the "koła naukowe" which constitute the majority of student societies available. Additionally we have identified an insufficient number of initiatives of a less formal nature focused on developing passions, interests, or hobbies outside a strictly academic setting.
- Interviewees also addressed the need to change the education system in Poland, which relies on too many energy-consuming contact-hours, leaving little time and energy for involvement in student societies. It was also pointed out that the curriculum places too much focus on theoretical content, without attention to the development of soft-skills, and practical knowledge.
- The interviewed students often mentioned the exclusivity of the societies, which mostly arose from lack of institutionalisation of student societies at university level.
- Student societies in Poland either lack sufficient hierarchy/formality which would allow it to function effectively or have a hierarchy where university faculty and professors have too much influence in the decision-making process reducing the independence and agency of students. Additionally, interviewees mentioned political affiliations of university decision makers, which negatively impacted activity of student societies and the representation of student's interests.



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