

Why we are **#ProudToBeGRE** and **#LoveSUs**

At Greenwich Students' Union, we have been disheartened to read the recent attack by the Adam Smith Institute on Students' Unions across the UK. Not only does the report contain a myriad of factual inaccuracies, it has also come at a time when students need (now more than ever) robust support from their Unions to be able to stay and succeed at University. We, the professional staff and Officers, at Greenwich Students' Union (GSU) wish to take this opportunity to highlight the value of our work within the wider Greenwich community, and in doing so illustrate the wider value of Unions across the UK.

GSU represents c. 19,000 students at the University of Greenwich. We have two goals, to empower students to change the world and have a great time at Greenwich. Students not only lead our organisation as Full-time GSU Officers, they have been partners in shaping all aspects of our service delivery and identify, including our organisational strategy "[The Big Plan](#)". We truly believe in student partnership and student leadership. We are confident in our position as a valued partner within the Greenwich community, and this has been consistently demonstrated through the Covid-19 crisis. Our staff team and Full-time GSU Officers have worked tirelessly over the summer to ensure a safe return to campus which meets the needs of all students, and we are proud of the successes secured for students in partnership with the University, such as:

- A socially distanced physical Welcome offer to ensure a quality student experience for all new and returning students
- Accessibility enhancements with remote learning to support the needs of Disabled students
- A no-detriment policy to protect the academic standing of students across the institution

To enable these successes, we spoke directly to our membership to understand the lived experience of students throughout lockdown. The quality of this research and recommendations were such that they have been utilised as a benchmark across the University. Our methods of evidence-based recommendations and lobbying result in high-quality long-term change in students' interests and ensures mutual respect and partnership with the University of Greenwich. One highlight from this survey was this quote from a member:

'I'm not so sure about the university itself but I really do appreciate what the GSU officers are doing, which is fighting for the student, keeping us updated and helping students who could be vulnerable. ...The pressure are still on the students...we still have to pay to full amount of tuition fee even though there was a strike earlier this year and on top of that our study was cut 4 weeks short...I hope everyone is coping well and whoever is making these surveys to help improve the students' lives and wellbeing, thank you. You are doing a great job.'

GSU, and Unions across the UK, offer a unique opportunity to support students who are most at risk of dropping out of University. Through the provision of free, independent, specialist, professional academic and welfare Advice services, we successfully ensure a 97% retention rate of students supported. During the Covid-19 lockdown, demands on this team increased by 100%, and the service was successfully able to support 100's of students during

one of the most challenging points in HE to date. This service alone is incredibly high value for money when we consider that a retained student is of monetary value to the University. From last year's 650 advice cases we can calculate a saving of £5.8 million per annum¹. Our Advice service is a valued highly by Greenwich staff, with 67% of cases coming from University staff referrals. Additionally, academic casework makes up 73% of service delivery.

Our commitment to students' wellbeing and retention has been recognised by the University, and is demonstrated through three areas of delegated responsibility to improve students' retention and attainment as outlined in the institutional Access and Participation Plan (APP).² This document, overseen by the University's Governing Body, is a regulatory requirement from the Office for Students. This responsibility is due to our ability to demonstrate impact from our services and meet OfS' requirements of ensuring a strong student voice shaping solutions alongside the communities they intend to benefit. In our stakeholder survey, we found '*Overall, the majority of stakeholders rate the impact of the SU as good or very good (82%).*' We are trusted to do our work and deliver meaningful results.

The world is a challenging place, and students bear the brunt of facing a lifetime of debt in an unsustainable economy, patchy welfare provisions, a broken housing market, uncertain job prospects, less social mobility, greater inequality and a climate catastrophe. We are aware that a Students' Union cannot solve all of the above, but through supporting students' health and wellbeing, employability and skills and empowering students to change the world we are fulfilling our duties and fulfilling our purpose in line with the Education Act and our Charitable Objects.

Through employment, student groups, Societies and Sports teams we offer students employability opportunities and skills to boost CV's, build confidence and enable leadership. Through employment GSU annually puts £250,000 back into students' pockets and worked closely with the institution to ensure that students did not lose out on any income because of the Covid-19 crisis. Through volunteering opportunities such as student group leadership we have supported students with additional recognition on their degree certification as reported through HEAR. When surveyed all of our Student Group Leaders fed back that they '*recognise the benefits of being involved with the SU and 77% tell others about those benefits*'. Regarding 'Free Speech', GSU only regulates this in line with delegated legal responsibility in line with the Government 'Prevent' agenda and protocols.

We are aware that we have been quoted in the report. The low representation of our wonderfully diverse student body was a longstanding issue at GSU, and one which we have proudly resolved after working closely with the Democratic Society ([DemSoc](#)) to research and implement a community organising centred democratic structure³. This new democracy has given more power to self-organised student Societies as well as Academic Representatives, ensuring they are able to make direct improvements to their services and Union. This work

¹Setting tuition fees at £9,250 is £5.8 million per annum saved for the institution, or 4.5 times GSU's block grant. Over three years of fees that's up to £17.5million saved for the institution, roughly 14 times GSU's block grant. 2020/21 Block Grant: £1,261,000

² Access and Participation Plan University of Greenwich 2020/21 – 2024/25, pg. 17
https://docs.gre.ac.uk/_data/assets/pdf_file/0005/1686200/Access-and-Participation-Plan-2020-21-to-2024-25.pdf

³ <https://www.greenwichsu.co.uk/pageassets/aboutus/impactreports/The-Big-Impact-Highlights-for-201819.pdf>

was led by Officers, speaking to their expertise and value for GSU as an organisation and for the Greenwich community.

We are proud of our impact as a Charity, and our role as a community enabler at Greenwich. We know we are valued as experts in the student experience at Greenwich, that our Elected Officers demonstrate strong and relevant positions on behalf of the 18,000 strong student body, and that our expert staff support students through a challenging and transformative period in students' lives. Our staff team recognise the essential contribution they make, with 91% reporting that "*This organisation has strong values and operates to high ethical standards.*", and the majority "*would recommend this organisation as a good place to work*"⁴ We are regularly recognised by our University partners through policy, communication and in feedback as meeting our goals. However, most importantly, we are confident that we make a tangible difference to the lives of students at Greenwich, particularly those who need the most support to stay and succeed at University.

When we say we are #ProudToBeGRE and #LoveSUs it is because we truly are proud of our contribution, of our Officers, of our members and of our ability to represent students when they need us most.

John Schless
Chief Executive of Greenwich Students' Union

Bilal Ijaz
GSU President

⁴ GSU/NUS Staff Survey 2019/2020