

# **CUSU Explained: A Guide for Downing**

Prepared for:

Downing JCR Committee

Prepared by:

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## 1. Summary

Concern has been expressed that there is a lack of knowledge of the benefits of membership of Cambridge University Students Union (CUSU) for Downing students. This report examines the Ents, services, publications, welfare initiatives, target and access programmes, campaigning and support that CUSU provides that are of benefit specifically to Downing undergraduates. It concludes that CUSU is an invaluable asset to Downing (page 11), but much can be done by Downing JCR to increase an awareness of its benefits and use of its facilities (page 12).

## 2. Introduction

This report arose due to concerns expressed by Downing JCR Committee members that not enough information was available on the benefits of affiliation to CUSU. Downing JCR contributes around £2,200 annually from its own budget directly to CUSU. Some unease has been expressed that the benefits of this contribution are not clear to Downing JCR Committee or Downing students. As a result the Downing JCR President requested that:

*The JCR Vice-President urgently conduct an investigation to clarify the benefits and value of CUSU affiliation for Downing students*

This report is an agglomeration of information from existing CUSU literature, as well as discussions between with Downing JCR Senior Officers and CUSU President (2003-4) Ben Brinded (10/3/04). It is structured towards a focus on the benefits that CUSU provides in specific reference to Downing students, and ends with recommendations for Downing JCR.

Please note that any opinions expressed in this report are those of the author, and not necessarily those of Downing JCR, Downing Students or CUSU.

### **3. CUSU Ents for Downing Students**

- (a) CUSU runs club nights at all the main Cambridge clubs, sets music policy and entry prices, and negotiates drinks deals. These nights are popular with, and heavily attended by, large groups of Downing students on a regular basis.
- (b) CUSU Ents run one off nights like the Freshers' Week Event, Popsuperstars and the Summer Event (Diablo 2004). These are widely accepted to vary in quality, but generally prove quite popular. Ticket reps sell in Downing for the Events, and Popsuperstars had active participation from Downing.
- (c) CUSU employs an Entertainment Manager who is available to act as "a point of information and expertise for...college unions".

### **4. CUSU Publications for Downing Students**

- (a) TCS is produced and funded by CUSU, although it is editorially independent. This is delivered directly to Downing Porters Lodge, and provides a generally reliable news source alongside Varsity. Circulation is about 10,000 copies, and Downing students have worked for the paper and seem to value its supply.
- (b) All Freshers are given a copy (through our Freshers' Committee) of the "Cambridge Survival Guide", as well as a "Survival Pack" produced by upon arrival in Cambridge. Downing Freshers' Reps have typically found these a useful introduction to Cambridge life for new arrivals.

## 5. CUSU Services for Downing Students

- (a) **CUSU-NUS cards** – CUSU provide the cards annually, which are widely accepted as student ID and used for entrance and discounts, both within Cambridge and elsewhere.
  
- (b) **Societies Fair** – over 300 societies attend in Freshers' Week and the close proximity of Kelsey Kerridge to Downing means large numbers attend.
  
- (c) **Societies listings** – online catalogue of all Cambridge societies, with mailing list sign-up and “What’s On” sections.
  
- (d) **CUSU Mail service** – (formerly ICMS) CUSU organises the only free mail service for use by students, delivering to all 31 colleges (usually within 36 hours).
  
- (e) **Photocopying** – black and white as well as colour photocopying available for use by any student at the CUSU Offices. Copy printer and reprographics (e.g. lamination) recommended for large numbers of posters, or flyers etc.
  
- (f) **Vehicle hire** – student groups can hire two people-carriers or an equipment van from CUSU

## 6. CUSU Welfare Initiatives for Downing Students

- (a) CUSU runs three confidential **phonelines** with trained volunteers:
- Eating Disorders Support
  - LesBiGay (issues and support)
  - Beeline (sexual health, contraception, parenting etc.)
- (b) **Individual Student Support:** on average, two or three Cambridge students per day approach CUSU for support or help. This can be related to anything from disciplinary hearings to financial issues, academic concerns or local housing queries. CUSU will often take up a case of advocacy (defending a student against a perceived injustice) or refer to outside agencies for further advice and support in welfare matters. Disability Support services are particularly unique to CUSU, and something our JCR does not really cater for. It is understood that Downing students do make some use of the CUSU individual support facility instead of, or alongside, the service provided by Downing JCR.
- (c) **JCR Support** – CUSU provides support and training to the Downing JCR Welfare team, and our JCR Welfare Officer benefits from weekly network meetings with CUSU and other college Welfare Officers. CUSU also provides the cheap rape alarms, condom supply and free pregnancy tests that are given out to Downing students.
- (d) **Campaigns** – CUSU runs a series of awareness campaigns such as sexual health talks, cycle safety, or reducing exam stress. CUSU supplies ideas, materials and support. It is up to Downing JCR how extensively these welfare initiatives are made use of and publicised.

## **7. Access and Target for Future Downing Students**

- (a) CUSU organises the Shadowing Scheme where Sixth Formers visit Cambridge: sets up meeting and greeting; arranges some group meals and entertainment; produces a comprehensive booklet for students taking on shadows; organises a presentation and workshop for shadows visiting; and provides support logistics for Downing JCR Target Officer. Around 8 Downing students signed up or took shadows this year, but there is room for growth if Downing JCR wanted to promote this more widely.
- (b) CUSU organises its own target schemes for visiting schools, and other access-promoting trips, which link with Downing Target School Initiatives
- (c) CUSU publishes the Alternative Prospectus, with a detailed look at the less official side of Downing for potential applicants (updated in 2004)

## **8. Campaigning on Behalf of Downing Students**

CUSU campaigns within the University and nationally on a range of issues, the majority of which are believed to be relevant and important to Downing Students.

Recent examples include of investigation and campaign issues include:

- A Quality of Supervisions Survey
- Ongoing Campaign for a Central Union Building
- Support on general issues of discrimination and unfair treatment of students whether due to sex, race, age, disability, sexuality etc.
- Downing voted in a DCAC Open Meeting in 2002 on a motion to oppose Top-Up fees and support CUSU's campaign by 60 votes to 0 (14/11/02). Since then, CUSU has been of national importance in this debate.

## **9. CUSU Support for Downing JCR Officers**

CUSU provides training, advice and support for all Downing JCR Officers. Most Downing JCR Officers have a CUSU equivalent who is available to provide expertise or pooled knowledge and on relevant issues, as well as act as a point of contact to JCR Officers from other colleges. In general, past experience has found CUSU Sabbaticals extremely helpful when approached by our JCR Officers.

## **10. Value for Money for Downing and the question of disaffiliation**

The cost of a JCR affiliation to CUSU is calculated annually (increasing at or below the rate of inflation). Each Downing undergraduate pays around £5 per annum for CUSU affiliation, totalling our JCR contribution at £2,200. This money funds all of the above services; the Business Manager of TCS; and the funding for the six sabbatical positions. Additional funding come from club night profits.

It is not possible to accurately assess the value for money obtained by Downing JCR's affiliation to CUSU. It is clear that without CUSU, Downing JCR, in its current form, could not provide multiple instances of care and service to its students.

The most noticeable and important impacts of a *disaffiliation* from CUSU would probably be:

- Loss of CUSU-NUS ID cards - CUSU would not provide these to Downing undergraduates. This would deny discounted access to student club nights in Cambridge, and deny discounts without NUS ID
- Less promotion of CUSU welfare campaigns, materials and assistance from CUSU (although it is understood that an individual would probably not be denied welfare assistance from CUSU)
- Probably an end to the direct supply of TCS to Downing

- Downing cut off from CUSU shadowing schemes, and perhaps less promotion by CUSU of Downing College to potential applicants they come into contact with
- No support for Downing JCR Officers from CUSU, and a lack of direct and regular contact with other JCRs.

### **11. CUSU the Institution: Openness and Understanding**

CUSU governing body is termed CUSU Council, which is composed of representatives from CUSU and all the colleges. Downing JCR has two members: the President and Vice-President.

CUSU sometimes risks, like any student institution, becoming dominated by core members (individually and JCRs) and sidelining the opinions and potential contributions of more peripheral members. This is never a deliberate strategy of CUSU; instead it has been observed that CUSU can respond very well to approaches and appeals for greater JCR involvement.

Downing JCR Officers have observed recently that:

- a) The CUSU website lacks the sophistication and depth of information that Downing students have grown accustomed to. Navigation is poor, and information in plain English that explains CUSU issues is lacking. This was particularly noted at election time.
- b) Terms such as “CUSU Open Meeting”, “CUSU Council”, and “Sabbaticals” are not widely understood by Downing students. Some publicity from CUSU to forward to Downing students via e-mail was rejected by the JCR Vice-President as too technical and unclear for the average Downing student to warrant reading.
- c) Elections at CUSU are widely misunderstood and perceived as overly bureaucratic.
- d) In the 2004 second round elections voted on at CUSU Council, the Downing JCR Communications Officer withdrew his nomination for a

- CUSU position in protest at the lack of information available, and the “closed shop politics of CUSU”.
- e) Too many elections are believed to confuse and irritate Downing students. A recent initiative by the Downing JCR President to propose a motion for CUSU to hold University Council elections (for student representatives on the University governing body) at the same time as CUSU elections was rejected by CUSU Council.
  - f) Nevertheless, CUSU Council Chair acknowledged appreciation for an increased involvement of motions proposed by “non-CUSU people”.

## **12. Summary and Conclusions**

1. *CUSU provides an important and wide range of services to Downing students, many of which are used by our undergraduates*
2. *CUSU Ents, welfare initiatives and publications represent the most important contributions for Downing students, as well as the student ID card.*
3. *CUSU relies upon College Unions’ support and involvement. Furthermore, CUSU can be shaped by active JCRs that make use of its policy-making bodies and officers.*
4. *Disaffiliation represents a money-saving option, but would result in a noticeable, substantial and significant reduction in provisions for Downing students.*
5. *CUSU and its benefits are poorly understood by Downing students*
6. *Downing JCR could increase its involvement and interaction with CUSU, and better promote the services provided to Downing students*

## **12. Recommendations for Downing JCR**

### ***a) Increase awareness of CUSU to Downing students***

- 1) **Website:** A new CUSU section could be added to the (updated) Downing JCR website. Where CUSU delivers the necessary information on their website, links (regularly checked) can be provided. However, where an information gap exists between CUSU and Downing students, Downing JCR should undercut CUSU and provide our own source of information to increase an understanding and awareness of CUSU and CUSU provisions.

Specifically, it is recommended that:

- i) A CUSU Frequently Asked Questions section is added to Downing JCR website to address an information gap, particularly designed for those with no previous knowledge of CUSU (e.g. Freshers). Questions could include: “How is CUSU policy decided?”; “What’s the difference between CUSU and the Cambridge Union?”; “How are CUSU people elected”; “How do I get in touch with CUSU Welfare”?
  - ii) Details of CUSU Ents nights, and how to put yourself of a guest list be linked or written into our JCR (or DowningEnts) website.
  - iii) Full details of the times of operation and numbers of CUSU welfare phonelines be added to our Welfare section
- 2) Rewording and clarifying technical or unclear correspondence from CUSU to Downing Students should be continued. Any Downing JCR Officer sending out information of behalf of a third party such as CUSU should be happy *themselves* that all relevant information is available and easily understandable, otherwise there is little hope of the student community comprehending and responding positively.
  - 3) Attributing positive initiatives and assistance to CUSU should be encouraged to promote its benefits to Downing students, for example by

prefixing “CUSU” with the phrase e.g. “CUSU Phonelines” or “CUSU have supplied...”

***b) JCR Officers make more use of CUSU***

It is recommended that all Downing JCR Officers, if they have not already done so, establish contact with any relevant CUSU Officers. We pay for their service. Downing JCR Officers could make more use of their CUSU counterparts as a source of pooled knowledge, perhaps more experience (many have served on JCRs) and as a point of contact to other JCR Officers from other colleges who may be dealing with similar issues as our JCR.

The Downing JCR Ents Officer could also make use of the advertised accessibility of the CUSU Entertainment’s Manager for expertise and advice.

***c) An Active involvement in shaping CUSU policy***

Downing JCR should revive its involvement in CUSU policy-making, and propose motions relevant to our students at CUSU Council, then promote these within Downing. Motions can be proposed by the JCR President or Vice-President and seconded by the JCR Committee. At CUSU Open Meetings, any student can propose a motion. CUSU Council is open to any student to attend in a non-voting capacity, and Downing JCR Officers are encouraged to attend, particularly when an issue relevant to them is being discussed.

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