

University Bahá'í Societies Guidance Notes

Being a student at university is a unique and precious period of time that affords Bahá'í youth innumerable opportunities to generously share the world embracing vision of Bahá'u'lláh and invite their peers to join them in walking a path of service to humanity. University student populations are potentially particularly receptive to engaging in conversations that explore reality, the needs of this period in human history and the means for addressing them. Therefore, learning about how to effectively reach out to and systematically collaborate with this population in raising their capacity for service is potentially significant.

As you know, the current series of global Plans of the Faith is assisting us to learn about the methods, approaches and instruments to systematically move whole populations towards the goal of a new World Order envisioned by Bahá'u'lláh. Central to this is learning how to utilise that “instrument of limitless potentialities” the educational process associated with the training institute and the community building activities that it engenders. As a university student you will have the opportunity to build on your experience of learning how to utilise this instrument in a university environment. The processes and activities that students may wish to initiate in a university – from discussion groups, firesides, devotional meetings and study circles, amongst others - are clearly part of the natural rhythm and pattern of life that Bahá'ís and their co-workers everywhere are striving to achieve. Therefore, although university students have available to them the structure of Bahá'í societies that can potentially support Bahá'ís on campus, students should not feel that societies are the only or indeed the most effective approach to engaging university populations.

Forming a society should not be assumed to be necessarily beneficial in and of itself and in reading their reality students may wish to reflect on whether the nature and extent of their activities has reached a sufficient degree of complexity to require the organic development of a society as well as considering the capacity to sustain a Bahá'í society. For example, a group of friends working together as a teaching team, perhaps holding a devotional and one more study circles, is not likely to have reached a degree of complexity as to require the structure of a university society to enable it to carry out its activities effectively. A university society is merely a formal structure that allows for a degree of recognition by university authorities and access to university facilities; such as the ability to book and use university rooms, advertise events through university media and have stalls at university freshers' fairs. Therefore, the main function of a society is as a vehicle for the promotion of the name of the Faith, to facilitate interaction with university authorities and access to university facilities. In light of this understanding of a society as purely a structure with a relatively narrow function, Bahá'í students themselves need to read their reality and make the determination as to whether or not a Bahá'í society would complement their efforts on campus based on their particular circumstances, needs and opportunities available to them.

Purpose and objective of Bahá'í societies

Central to the effectiveness of a Bahá'í society is unity of vision amongst its members about its purpose. The main purpose of a society is to utilise it as a vehicle to implement the elements of the current Plans of the Faith in a university setting. As you know from your involvement in the framework for action in the clusters in which you have come from, this entails engaging fellow students and staff in the materials of the Training Institute and related community building activities that flow from it, as a powerful instrument in contributing to the spiritual and material transformation of society. Therefore the focus of your efforts will centre on establishing devotional meetings, study circles and as opportunities arise and

capacity is developed, junior youth groups and children classes in the communities near your university or where students reside. However, this focus does not preclude making use of innovative methods to reach out to the university population to expand the pool of individuals involved in activities. This may include stalls at freshers' fairs and public talks and events. What is important is that the society does not simply focus on holding a series of events as an end in itself. Events should be planned and conceived of as furthering the process of engaging individuals on a path of service through their involvement with the Training Institute and its activities.

Further related objectives of the society include learning how to contribute to prevalent discourses related to the betterment of society taking place on campus, and cooperating with other religious groups and societies in a spirit of friendliness and fellowship. This can take the form of involvement in campus based interfaith activities or simply collaborating with other groups and societies on specific issues or events. Both participating in discourses and cooperating with other religious groups and societies should arise naturally as students become drawn further into the life of a university as the Training Institute and its activities develop on a campus. They should be pursued as opportunities arise and commensurate with available resources with reference to recent messages of the Universal House of Justice for guidance on the principles guiding the nature of Bahá'í involvement. Some students may have had the opportunity to attend the undergraduate seminars provided by the Institute for Studies in Global Prosperity (ISGP) which in conjunction with its publically available materials may be of use in this area as the need arises.

A useful first step for Bahá'í students on campus may be to initially meet together to deepen on recent messages from the Universal House of Justice, reflect on their respective circumstances and opportunities available to them and make plans for action accordingly. It is most fruitful if the Auxiliary Board member or his/her assistant, the Local Spiritual Assembly and the relevant Cluster Agencies are invited to participate in this process, so that any plan is well integrated into and coherent with the efforts of the local Bahá'í community. This process could assist in making a decision on whether establishing a Bahá'í society would complement efforts on campus. Indeed, a group of students could consider themselves to be a cluster based "teaching team" like any other.

Relationship with other agencies and institutions of the Faith

University societies are formally affiliated with their respective Students' Unions and generally under their sole authority. Therefore, although these arrangements may slightly differ in some universities, societies are largely not able to have any formal relationships, such as through clauses in their constitutions, with bodies outside of the university such as a Local Spiritual Assembly. However, obviously as Bahá'ís, students are individually under the authority and guidance of Local and National Assemblies and related agencies. Therefore, in the spirit of learning and accompaniment it would be useful for Bahá'í societies to inform their respective Local Assemblies of their formation and as required seek guidance, support and periodically share news of their activities.

As the members of a society can view themselves as a teaching team it is important they consult closely with their respective Cluster Agencies regarding their activities. Regular consultation, reflection and planning with Cluster Agencies can assist in ensuring the work of the society coheres with the broader processes underway in the cluster and focus it on systematically engaging the university population in a process of capacity building and empowerment.

From time to time the National Assembly's Office of Public Affairs has called upon Bahá'í students and their friends in university settings around the country to assist in its activities and programmes. The support of such students and a Bahá'í society, if one should exist, can be of assistance on such occasions.

Societies should also inform the National Assembly of their formation with details of its members via email on nsa@bahai.org.

Administrative arrangements

As previously mentioned university societies are formally affiliated with their respective Students' Unions. Different universities will have different processes and requirements for establishing a society. Therefore, the Union should be contacted in the first instance regarding the relevant requirements for formally establishing a society. There will normally be a "Societies Officer" or similar position in the Students' Union who will oversee the formation of societies. Most Unions will require the submission of a society constitution and a draft has been attached for your use which details the basic administrative arrangements needed to ensure the formation and maintenance of a society within a Students' Union framework (please consult with the National Assembly if amendments are made). In this regard students should be mindful not to become bogged down in the administrative aspects of the society to the detriment of its substantive work. Although reasonable effort should be taken to ensure all formal requirements of a Students' Union are adhered to, a degree of latitude and flexibility should be employed in administrative matters.

List of useful contacts

National Spiritual Assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United Kingdom
27 Rutland Gate
London
SW7 1PD
Phone number – 0207 5842566
Email – nsa@bahai.org.uk

Office of Public Affairs
27 Rutland Gate
London
SW7 1PD
Phone number – 0207 0197780
Email – opa@bahai.org.uk