School of Computing, Engineering, and the Built Environment
Edinburgh Napier University

PHD STUDENT PROJECT

Application instructions:

Detailed instructions are available at:
https://www.napier.ac.uk/research-and-innovation/doctoral-college/how-to-apply

Prospective candidates are encouraged to contact the Director of Studies (see details below) to discuss the project and their suitability for it.

Project details

Supervisory Team:
- DIRECTOR OF STUDY: Dr Ella Taylor Smith (Email: e.taylor-smith@napier.ac.uk)
- 2ND SUPERVISOR: Dr Khristin Fabian

Subject Group: Applied Informatics

Research Areas: Computer Science \ Human Computer Interaction, Communication & Media Studies \ Digital Media, Education \ Higher Education, Sociology

Project Title: Effective online and offline engagement for student societies, associations, and unions

Project description:
Student societies have traditionally played key roles in higher education: bringing students together to help each other, to relax, follow interests, and learn skills in the process, as well as empowering students through representation in university committees and beyond (Loader et al. 2015). However, the marketisation and massification of higher education have changed the societies' context (Day & Dickinson 2018). Universities are increasingly taking on tradition student union roles, for example around providing social spaces and wellbeing support. Meanwhile, an increasingly diverse student body includes many students who would struggle to find time for activities outside the core necessities of university study, for example due to needing to commit more hours to paid work, living further from campus, and having caring responsibilities (Blake et al. 2002). The Covid-19 pandemic further disrupted the higher education community (Jones & Bell 2024),

but also increased familiarity with remote participation and online meetings (Fabian et al. 2024).

This study investigates the current engagement choices of student societies. For organisation and activities that do not necessarily take place in physical spaces (such as sport), how are student societies engaging with them members, recruiting new members, and interacting with associations, unions, and the university? Different universities have very different contexts, especially in terms of location, student body, and community, as well as different structures for student societies and representation. So it is envisaged that the study would collect data from several number of universities, for example using case-studies and /or social network analysis (Taylor-Smith & Smith 2019; Karimi & Matous 2018). A sociotechnical approach would be appropriate to support the exploration of online and offline engagement and the choices around technologies and spaces for community.

Applicants are welcome from a wide range of social science backgrounds, including informatics and HCI, with at least some experience of sociotechnical topics or approaches, plus an interest in communities/ democracy. Previous experience of a student society or union would be helpful.

References:

[1] Blake, S., Capper, G., and Jackson, A. (2022). Building Belonging in Higher Education Recommendations for developing an integrated institutional approach. Pearson and Wonkhe. https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2022/10/Building-Belonging-October-2022.pdf

[2] Day, M., and Dickinson, J. (2018). David Versus Goliath: The Past, Present and Future of Students' Unions in the UK. Higher Education Policy Institute, London:

https://www.hepi.ac.uk/wp-content

Fabian, K., Smith, S., and Taylor-Smith, E. (2024). Being in Two Places at the Same Time: a Future for Hybrid Learning Based on Student Preferences. TechTrends, 68, 693–704. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11528-024-00974-x

[3] Jones, C.S., and Bell, H. (2024). Under increasing pressure in the wake of COVID-19: a systematic literature review of the factors affecting UK undergraduates with consideration of engagement, belonging, alienation and resilience. Perspectives : Policy and Practice in Higher Education, 28(3), 141–151. https://doi.org/10.1080/13603108.2024.2317316

[4] Karimi, F., and Matous, P. (2018). Mapping diversity and inclusion in student societies: A social network perspective. Computers in Human Behavior, 88, 184–194. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2018.07.001

[5] Loader, B.D., Vromen, A., Xenos, M.A., Steel, H., and Burgum, S. (2015). Campus politics, student societies and social media. The Sociological Review (Keele), 63(4), 820–839. https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-954X.12220

[6] Taylor-Smith, E. and Smith, C.F. (2019). Investigating the online and offline contexts of day-to-day democracy as participation spaces. Information, Communication & Society, 22(13), 1853-1870,

https://doi.org/10.1080/1369118X.2018.1469656

Candidate characteristics

Education:
> A first-class honours degree, or a distinction at master level, or equivalent achievements in Information science or an allied subject, alternatively, a background in studying comunity representation (e.g., through politics or sociology)

Subject knowledge:
- Computer-mediated communication and/or online communities
- Higher education

Essential attributes:
- Competent in basic qualitative research techniques
- Good written and oral communication skills
- Strong motivation, with evidence of independent research skills relevant to the project
- Good time management

Desirable attributes:
- Experience of student societies/ unions
- Experience of participatory research
- Competent in basic quantitative research techniques