

Running a STAR group

How to build and maintain a successful STAR group

May 2010



Getting and keeping members

Members are the foundation to the success of any student society. Without enough members your STAR group will not be able to do all the projects and activities you want to. You need to think about how you will attract more members and then maintain high membership throughout the year.

Top Tips for a Fab Freshers

Freshers Fair is quite possibly the most important day of your STAR year. But relax. Here are some basic tips for planning your freshers stall.

- ★ **Book your stall.** You might need to do this far in advance so make sure you're not too late, and that you're in a prominent place with similar societies (not in a cupboard with Engineering Soc). Find out how big your table is, whether you have a noticeboard or a place to plug in your laptop, etc.
- ★ **Order your materials.** Contact STAR national team in advance to get your resources to help promote STAR and refugees (banners, t-shirts, stickers, leaflets, posters).
- ★ **Plan your first meeting.** Meet together as a committee or group and set a date, book a room, invite any speakers and decide what you're going to do. Make it interesting, fun, a good opportunity for people to meet each other, and be clear on what they can do next.
- ★ **Now advertise your first meeting or event clearly.** Have a poster or flyer with clear details of how to find out more and what they can go to over the next few weeks (with a set date, time, location, etc).
- ★ **Make your stall stand out.** New students will often have a huge number of societies they can join, so you need to ensure that your stall will get noticed. Put up signs and arrows, give out freebies like stickers or cakes, use the STAR banner, have photos from last year, play music, maybe have footprints leading to your stall...
- ★ **Organise who is on the stall.** Make a rota and have enough helpers so one or two of you can wander around giving out leaflets and directing people to your stall.
- ★ **Prepare a sign-up sheet.** Make it as easy as possible for people to sign up to your mailing list! That means making sure you've got plenty of sheets with enough space to write, pens that actually work, and that you don't lose them underneath all the leaflets and cookies.
- ★ **Have a small activity on your stall.** Get people involved straight away with a petition, a quiz, a short video...
- ★ **Be friendly and approachable!** Try to be welcoming - if you start to get grumpy after 3 hours then take a break! 😊

Making your group attractive

How are you going to make your society the one that everyone wants to join? And how can you make sure that members stay interested and enthusiastic throughout the year?

Below are some ideas on the 'good' and the 'not so good' for getting and keeping members.

A Good Society will:

- ★ **Have clear aims.** Be clear on why the group exists and what you hope to achieve. Build a sense of identity and set goals for the group to work towards together.
- ★ **Be Active.** Have a variety of opportunities to get involved, follow through on your plans, have regular activities to keep people interested.
- ★ **Be a good way to meet new people.** This means meetings with an opportunity to chat and get to know each other, projects which involve teamwork, and of course socials!
- ★ **Fun!** STAR is serious about improving the lives of refugees, but we can have fun while we do it! Bringing the student and refugee community together is something to celebrate!
- ★ **Offer responsibility.** Delegate tasks to the group, offer the chance for new members to join the committee or lead on new events or projects
- ★ **Offer new Experiences.** Give people the chance to try new things and gain experience in something valuable.
- ★ **Offer personal development.** If your group can offer training, the chance to learn about different issues, opportunities to develop skills, then make it obvious!
- ★ **Make a difference.** Show people what you do, how they can really make a difference, and celebrate your achievements!
- ★ **Be contactable.** It is important that all members of the society can easily contact the committee members so that they feel involved in the running of the group and they can get information when needed.
- ★ **A Society to be Proud of.** A lot of the above adds up to being a group that people want to be a part of – an active, vibrant, fun, unique group that makes a real difference!

Try to avoid:

- ★ **Not keeping commitments.** Don't bite off more than you can chew! If you don't follow through on your plans, members might lose interest and think you're all talk.
- ★ **Being Disorganised.** Any group or organisation that appears out of control and unclear on what it's doing will be off-putting for potential members.
- ★ **Operating 'Top down'.** If all ideas and decisions come from a few people at the top without discussion or consultation then you risk making people feel they are not part of the group.
- ★ **Assuming knowledge or experience.** Some members may be new to working with refugees or campaigning. Make your group an opportunity to learn, not one that makes unfair demands. Help people grow in confidence through encouragement.
- ★ **Demanding too much time.** People will vary in how much they can commit and this will change throughout the year, so give people a range of things to get involved with – some one-off opportunities and other regular requirements.
- ★ **Being Exclusive.** Make sure it's not just a group for you and your friends. Involve

everyone in group activities, try to avoid making important decisions or plans amongst yourselves outside of meetings, or having socials with only a select few invited from the group.

- ★ **Being unclear on what you do.** Provide clear information and explain fully in meetings who you are and what you do – don't assume everyone already knows!
- ★ **Being too ideological / political.** STAR is about supporting refugees, but your group should encourage as wide a spectrum backgrounds and opinions to get involved. Don't require that everyone agrees with you about everything!

Raise your profile

You can be the most perfect society in the world but not have enough members if nobody knows you're there! You need to make sure that as many people on campus know that there is a STAR group at their university and that if they are interested in refugees you're the group to contact. Think about these ideas for raising the profile of your group:

- ★ **Facebook.** Start and develop a group. An easy way to advertise, send messages and discuss your plans.
- ★ **Website / blog.** Start your own by trying www.blogger.com or www.wordpress.com
- ★ **Be visible.** Check the Union Diary for events such as "One World Festivals" and "International Weeks" which you could book stalls at and/or organise events for.
- ★ **Use STAR brand.** Put the STAR logo on all your posters, flyers and leaflets so people get to recognise it, and wear your STAR t-shirts and hoodies
- ★ **Build coalitions with similar groups.** Good relationships with other societies can have loads of mutual benefits from free advertising and sharing contacts, to joint events and practical help.
- ★ **Contact with university departments.** See if you can advertise on departmental notice boards or contact lecturers and departments who you think may have a natural fit with your groups aims and interests.
- ★ **Design your own posters.** Make them distinctive and eye catching and display them in novel places. Build a consistent brand, with the same font, your own slogan, a clear contact or place to find more information.
- ★ **Use student media.** Radio, TV and newspapers are always on the look out for quirky or interesting stories. So give them some!
- ★ **STAR website.** Write a news story about your group and send it to students@star-network.org.uk.
- ★ **Student Union website.** Use it to signpost people to your group – make sure to provide contact details and to keep the information up to date!
- ★ **Upload videos** of your events on www.youtube.com and put a link on the STAR website or your own blog / site.

Effective Meetings

Meetings are the most effective way for groups to plan their work. They allow for discussion, clear communication and an opportunity to build strong relationships in the group. Planning how your group will use meetings and conducting them in the right way is key for your STAR group to operate successfully during the year.

There are different varieties you can have, from general meetings open to everyone to smaller sub-group meetings for particular purposes. We'll focus here on some basic points to keep in mind when planning your groups 'general meetings'.

General Meetings

Before the meeting...

- ★ **Regular time.** Try to pick a regular meeting time (e.g. every two weeks, Tuesday 6pm), as this will allow members to plan their time and do their best to attend. Check when other similar societies are meeting (ask your societies officer) and don't clash!
- ★ **Book a room.** If there are important topics to be discussed and decisions made with large numbers of people, then you'll need a quiet room of an appropriate size to ensure discussions can be heard and everyone is comfortable. Do this in advance so you're not stuck without a meeting place. If it's a smaller meeting on more informal topics, then you can always find a local cafe. But wherever you choose make sure it is accessible to everyone.
- ★ **Agree an agenda.** Initially this will need to be done by the committee, so meet together in advance and agree on the main topics on discussion. In future, the outline of the agenda can be agreed at the end of the previous meeting, or a suggested outline circulated by email giving people an opportunity to add items, or just pass a paper round at the beginning of the meeting.
- ★ **Email meeting details.** Including:
 - Date, time, location (nice and clear, don't hide them in large paragraphs!)
 - Agenda

At the meeting...

- ★ **Signpost the room.** Make sure people can find your room and have a doorkeeper at the beginning to invite people into the room and keep the door open until the meeting has truly started.
- ★ **Organise seating.** Set up the room to suit the meeting style. Let everyone be included if you're having discussions, and spread the committee around the group so that you don't come across as a scary clique!
- ★ **Appoint a Chair / facilitator.** This can be done before hand by the committee, or agreed at each meeting. But it's important that someone takes responsibility for the following:
 - Introducing the meeting and welcoming everyone
 - Keeping time
 - Ensuring each agenda item is discussed
 - Allowing everyone the opportunity to contribute
 - Discussions stays on topic
 - Everyone is clear on the decision made and action points agreed
- ★ **Appoint note-taker if appropriate.** Agree for someone to take the minutes and

type them up afterwards to email round. Then everyone is clear on what was discussed and what tasks were agreed.

- ★ **Introductions.** There are a range of things you can do, but it's important (especially with new people attending) that you give every a chance to introduce each other. And often you'll want to make people feel more relaxed, so think of a quick activity or game to begin.
- ★ **Encourage participation.** Give people a chance to get involved with brainstorming sessions, banner painting, etc.
- ★ **Identify Action Points.** It's vital that after each discussion everyone is clear on *what* action is to be taken next, *who* is going to do it, and *when* they will do it. Check what's been agreed, write it down, then repeat them at the end of the meeting to confirm.
- ★ **Take a break.** If your meeting is over an hour then have a pause for 5-10 minutes and consider providing snacks.
- ★ **Social!** It's often a good idea to have a social activity after the meeting. It helps the group get to know each other and gives you something to look forward to!

After the meeting...

- ★ **Email minutes.** Send everyone who attended and those who couldn't make it the meeting minutes with any agreed actions for people to follow up, plus key dates for the coming weeks.
- ★ **Think!** Reflect on what worked and what didn't, and adjust your meeting style for next time – whether it's to be clearer on who's doing which task, not running over time, encouraging participation, etc.

Your First Meeting

The first few meetings are the most important. There are hundreds of societies out there, so having attracted your new and enthusiastic members you now need to provide them with more info on practical ways they can get involved.

Use the first meeting to:

- ★ Introduce STAR network: what STAR groups do around the UK, national events (National Conference, Action Week)
- ★ Introduce your group and committee, promote what you did last year
- ★ Explain some of the basic issues about asylum in the UK. Perhaps show a brief video or do a quiz
- ★ Get ideas from the group about what they would like to do in the coming term
- ★ But don't bombard people with too much info, especially boring admin!

STAR national team can attend your first meeting. We can help you out by introducing refugee issues and talking about STAR. Please contact the national team to arrange a visit: students@star-network.org.uk

You might also want to think about the following:

- ★ Advertise! Make a meeting poster and display them in cafes, bars, on departmental notice boards and on your society notice board.
- ★ If you have friends in other societies who are meeting before you, ask them if they would be happy to advertise your meeting too (and vice versa of course)
- ★ Pass around a list for people to fill in their contact details again
- ★ Make new people feel welcome:

- Introduce everyone at the start
- Explain how your meetings work
- Avoid in-jokes and jargon
- Make sure you explain agenda topics before beginning your discussion
- Try to have room for questions

Varying meetings

Here are some examples of how to spice up & diversify your meetings...

- ★ **Presentations by members.** Encourage people to research a topic about asylum and present to the rest of the group (e.g. pick a different country where refugees come from each week and explain the situation and why people are leaving) or to give an overview of something they have experience in.
- ★ **External speakers** can often add interest and expertise to your meeting. But remember, speakers tend to be very busy people. Be well prepared to use their time effectively. Have a back up plan too.
- ★ **Show a documentary.** Get a short DVD (15 mins) from the STAR national office and watch it at the end.

Inviting speakers

Speakers could include refugees or asylum seekers from your volunteering projects who are happy to speak about their experiences, people involved in local refugee organisations or support agencies, university lecturers, MPs, or STAR staff.

Always:

- Write to confirm the event; the date, time and place of meeting as well as what it is you would like them to talk about and whether anyone else will be speaking too
- Explain how you are advertising their talk and check they are happy with this
- Give them some info about STAR and your group in advance
- Ask them before the meeting how they would like to be introduced
- Write and thank them for coming
- Make it clear if you can pay expenses or not

Communicating

Communication between members of your group is crucial for the successful planning and delivery of your activities. Although meetings are the most effective way to communicate with each other, it's important you use email, phones and websites to send messages and encourage discussion.

Emailing

Email is the easiest way to communicate to large groups of people. If you work hard to get lots of names on your mailing list and to write clear and friendly emails then you'll establish a good communication base.

General tips:

- **Group email address.** To put on posters, etc and to use for communicating with STAR national and other organisations
- **Bring a mailing list** to all events so people can sign up
- **Regular email times** and standard layouts help a clear flow of information
- **Be realistic about your readers!** Remember that many people on your mailing list may not open your email (since they signed up for lots of societies), so be honest to yourself about how many people are getting your message!

A typical method will be to send a **weekly update** of announcements for anyone interested:

- **Clear subject heading:** 1) Who it's from (2) What it's about
- **Include contents** at the top if you have a few items
- **Highlight key info** - any dates, times, locations so they can be found
- **Keep it brief.** Most people will skim-read for the key information, so make it easy!
- **Be specific** if you are asking your readers to do something
- **Make any invitation or action clear.** If you want people to come to a meeting or click on a link make sure they know it!

Changing committees

Everyone has to leave university at some point, and this means leaving your beloved STAR group as well! Passing on the knowledge, skills and experience you have picked up to the next crop of students is vital for the long-term success of your STAR group.

Here's some suggestions for how to handover the running of your group.

Why have a committee at all?

Having a committee (or 'Exec', etc) will give the group greater stability, better decision-making ability and will ensure that no one becomes too stressed with all the responsibility. With different members of the group taking responsibility for different areas you are more likely to get things done. Students' Unions also usually require that there are certain elected officers in your society.

Identifying people to takeover

If you've got a big strong group with plenty of people interested for next year, then it should be easy! But keep in mind the following:

- ★ **Be Clear** - people need to know what they are committing to
- ★ **Be Reassuring** – let people know that they can take on less responsibility if they need to; they are not signing their lives away, all contributions are welcome
- ★ **Advice and support** is available from the STAR national team for new committees by phone, email, or visits. We can talk things through using our knowledge of how other groups have been successful.
- ★ **FREE Committee Training** is on offer in June! If they're unsure about running a group, or what STAR is about, they can come to this event to prepare for next year.
- ★ **Rewards** – chance to lead a group, establish lasting projects, great addition to CV, chance to develop important skills for planning, managing, etc.

If you don't think you have anyone in your group who might be able to take over, and you need to find some more people, then you could:

- ★ **Advertise** for the roles through all available channels (volunteering bureau, other societies, relevant departments) – including a free invitation for STAR national Committee Training
- ★ **Hold an open election** – advertise widely, make sure people know they can nominate themselves without previous activity or knowledge
- ★ **Events** – advertise at any related event you can, run by STAR or not!
- ★ **Invite national team** to speak at a intro event

Handing over responsibility

If you've got some new committee members, the next challenge is to have a smooth handover to prepare your successors. If you can, try the following:

- ★ **Face to face handover** - have a separate meeting, this gives an opportunity for the new committee to ask questions
- ★ **Set a date** for when your successor will take over from you completely. This will avoid confusion for yourselves and others you work with

- ★ **Make information accessible** - if you have lots of old bits of paper and materials, try to make sure they are organised so they are easy for someone else to use
- ★ **Help arrange a meeting** between the new committee and key people you work with
- ★ **Introduce them to STAR national** – send us their email, or encourage them to give us a call
- ★ **Exchange contact details** so they can ask for advice next year

The best way to handover to the next committee will be by writing things down. You will be giving them a lot of information, so just telling them won't be enough.

It might help to **write a short summary**, putting all the key information in one place. You could aim to include:

- ★ **Outline of your role** - what you were responsible for, the main difficulties, any tips you picked up.
- ★ **Activities List** - a list of what your group did this year, how it was done, positives and negatives, recommendations for next year.
- ★ **Contacts List** - a list of all important and useful contacts (inc. who they are, what your contact with them has been about)
- ★ **Friends and partnerships** - a brief list/description of the societies, groups, departments and organisations who you've worked with.
- ★ **STAR calendar** - Committee Training in April, National conference in November, Freshers' Pack in September, Action Day in February/March.
- ★ **National team support** - what the national team can offer: specialised training, ideas shared from across the network, contact with other STARs, advice on activities, projects, and events.
- ★ **Tips** - it's often the little things that will really help, make sure your experience is not lost!

Note: using a group email address is a good idea because then everyone you work with will be able to stay in touch with the new group.

What to do if you don't have a new committee

If you are worried that you won't find any new members to run your STAR group, then you can take some steps so that the information is kept safe for a future re-birth!

- ★ 'Handover' to **STAR National** all information and contacts. If students get interested the following year we can help them pick up where you left off!
- ★ Contact **local partner organisations** and inform them of the situation. Ask them to contact STAR national to discuss possible ways forward.
- ★ Contact **Societies sabbatical officer** or equivalent. 'Handover' the society to them for safe keeping. Ask if they can book a freshers stall for STAR national to run to recruit more students.
- ★ Contact **Union volunteering bureau / Student Community Action**. Ask if they can keep any volunteering opportunities open to students next year.
- ★ Ask if any similar, friendly **societies** will keep knowledge of past work, continue to advertise certain opportunities, and encourage interested students to start a new group by contacting STAR national.

Committee roles

The roles that you have on your committee – and your committee size – will depend on the activities and needs of your group. The important thing is to make sure you always identify a set of tasks that need doing *before* creating a role (rather than creating a role and later finding that it isn't clear what this person is supposed to do!).

We've included some standard roles and tasks that you can consider when creating the roles for your group.

Chair/President:

- Coordinate overall activity
- Ensure group stays focused on its aims
- Support other committee members in their roles
- Act as chair for group meetings
- Communicate with the STAR national team
- Communicate with the Students' Union, other societies and external organisations

Secretary:

- Take minutes of meetings
- Write emails to members
- Manage website/Facebook group
- Support Chair/President with administrative tasks

Treasurer:

- Record donations/money raised
- Prepare any budgets/grant application forms for your student's union
- Organise floats for stalls/activities

Volunteering Coordinator:

- Maintain contact with volunteers and update them on project info, changes and developments
- Keep in contact with local refugee support organisations
- Ensure volunteers have access to the information and advice they need
- Lead on making sure the contribution of volunteers is recognized

Campaigns Coordinator:

- Make sure the group is updated on STAR national campaign info
- Coordinate group campaigning actions
- Communicate with local organisations with mutual campaigning aims
- Keep updated on local campaign events