

## "It's really important to be yourself": Q&A with Alex Urquhart

Alex Urquhart, YUSU President, responds to the questions that new first years should know the answers to

By Imogen Bellamy, News Editor  
Wednesday 27 September 2017



Background image: Adam Kriesch

### What is YUSU and what does it do for freshers?

The primary function of York University Students' Union is as a representative body for students. Nationally we represent York for the NUS, but YUSU and the elected Sabbs also sit on the main governance boards of the University. This means if there's a change coming to campus that the student body are against, we are there to fight against the change. Equally, if it's a change that the students want, we'll take that consensus and bring it to the people with the influence to make sure that it's discussed in all the right places.

YUSU also provides independent and confidential support. If you're going through exceptional circumstances or having difficulties with your academic procedures, we're here to advise you and help you through such processes.

The services that a first year will come into contact with most, however, are our events and commercial services. The Student Union run large functions such as the Freshers' Fair and the Summer Ball. We also run satellite venues across campus, examples being The Glasshouse, The Courtyard and The Lounge. As a registered charity, the profits from these go back into funding student projects and ambitions across campus - those often being things first years are able to get involved with.

### How would you suggest students get involved with campus life and with YUSU?

The main thing I would recommend are sports clubs and societies. You can sign up at the stands across campus at the Freshers' Fair - some you'll have heard of and some you won't. We have everything from Quidditch to Fetish! Signing up to societies and trying them out is worth it, even if you don't end up

enjoying it. It's the same with sports teams: just go to as many taster sessions as you can.

Get involved with your college committees too. We have the college elections coming up this term and it's a great way to participate on a more manageable level. You can start with putting on events, acting in a representative function for liberation groups and interacting with your local community. This can build and grow into bigger roles: your beginning in a JCRC could lead to a part in YUSU later. The college committee roles work under the umbrella of YUSU and are part of their networks.

### **What future plans should we be looking forward to?**

The Sabbs are setting up a petition site that's hopefully going to go live at the beginning of 2018. It's similar to the government's Parliament.uk site, its aim being to facilitate political engagement within the student body. If anyone feels that they have an idea that needs to be implemented in York, they can use the site to bring it publicity and to get support behind it. This leads to getting it discussed in meetings by the people who can make the idea a reality, thus enabling the opportunity for everyone to create real change on campus.

We're also planning on launching the Students' Notice Board. Currently, when you have an idea for an event that you want to get off the ground, you'll need student resources. The Notice Board will catalogue these. If someone is a photographer, a DJ or owns PA equipment, their details can be put in there. This means when you want to hire specific services, you'll know where to find them.

I'm also starting an initiative, similar to a lecturer's open office hours, called "Pool & a Pint with the Prez". From Week 1 onwards, every Tuesday evening from 5.30 to 6.30, I'll play three games of pool with anyone at any bar on campus. You choose the table, I'll buy the round! I'll get you a pint and you can talk to me about anything. It can be important university issues that you'd like me to address or something completely different - you may not want to talk at all! It's up to you. It's just a great way for me to have a chance to speak to different students all over campus.

### **Why should freshers engage with student politics?**

I think, in recent national elections, students have proven our influence and our voice. It's important that we make informed votes and choices. As a demographic, students are a powerful, vocal and energetic group. For that to be harnessed we need to work together. Student politics can be very effective if used in the right way; and that begins on campus.

### **What is your personal vision for the future of YUSU?**

I would like more people to engage with YUSU as their representatives and finding easy ways for them to do that. "Pool & a Pint" and the petition site go some way towards doing that. At the moment, if a student feels passionately about something and wants to make a change, they're still not likely to do anything about it. If I could, I'd like to make it that little bit easier for students to say: "Okay, I want to achieve this goal - and I can!" I would be extremely happy if that facilitated action happened this year.

### **Do you have any general advice for the new first years?**

The obvious piece of advice you hear all the time is it's really important to be yourself when you get here, and I can't stress that enough. It's better to be in a group of friends who know and care for the real you rather than the person you're trying to pretend to be.

Another thing to remember is to be kind to others. If you’re yourself, you’re having a great time and you know all the STYCs by name on the first day, that’s great! You’re going to be just fine. That’s when you need to look out for the person who’s a bit awkward or feeling left out. It will mean the world to them. Nobody should be lonely on these first few nights at York and nobody will be if everyone looks out for each other.

You should be brave. Try new experiences. Join the societies whose names you can’t pronounce, or the sports you’ve never heard of. It will enrich your student experience for the better if you do.

**To commemorate you time as the Chair of Derwent College, you got a tattoo of its logo. Do you have any similar post-presidency plans?**

Currently I’m a little bit asymmetric, so it’s definitely on the cards! One cheek has an emblem, the other’s looking a little bare at the moment – maybe!



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