

Impervious to adversity and committed to the vision, Lesley Dixon is proof that higher education and the student experience can change for the better.

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“A ‘flotilla of small boats rather than one large ship’ is how one member of staff described Leeds Student Union nine years ago,” Lesley Dixon says in her characteristically succinct fashion.

A nautical metaphor which aptly encapsulates how the constituent parts of Leeds Union had become scattered on the seas of higher education. It was that year in 2000, that Lesley Dixon a bright and experienced innovator, jumped ship from the University of London to captain LUU and its 33,000 members as its chief executive and unifying force.

It has been Dixon’s visionary skill and steely determination combined with a personable and self-effacing attitude which has made what was a drifting flotilla into a strong and cohesive body. Nearly ten years on Dixon’s green fingers have tended to what was wilting and won the 2009 NUS HE student’s union of the year, beating off stiff competition from the University of Sheffield whose title was lost.

Dixon clear and judicious business sense was an applied formula from the beginning. She says matter-of-factly, “there were lots and lots of individual bits rather than being joined up. It wasn’t in a good place and parts of it were dysfunctional, I was determined to do something about it.”

The complex and daunting task to reconstruct, restore and refurbish the walls of Leeds Union required Dixon’s team to paint its interior in a slick shade that would dry as strong and effective. The ideas for revenue and profit which would stem from a solid and talented staff model which Dixon nurtured herself were balanced and relying upon the need to engage with the student demographic at a grassroots

level. The primer, was market research.

“Back in September 2000 we were quite strong commercially: we took a lot of money, but not necessarily as much as we might have done. The key thing was doing proper market research and establishing a proper marketing department. We truly understand what it is that our members want,” Dixon says. The direct voice which came from the students was vital for a true and democratic reading of what they coveted and disliked, as Dixon makes clear, “We have our strong points but that does not absolutely mean we are the best at everything.”

However, Dixon is keen to vindicate any point of negativity. “Many services didn’t exist we had to set them up and they were built from nothing.”

Nevertheless, it is one thing to communicate with the student population but quite another to retain their consumer interest and commitment in a time of financial difficulty. When students are lacking in disposable cash due to forking out for inflated accommodation costs, rising fees and basic staples such as food, the Union has experienced an unexpected inconsistency in a once easy form of income.

“Our summer ball is a huge event and we had a target to sell 10,000 tickets which we didn’t quite hit,” Dixon explains. “Partly because of the current climate and that students don’t have the money to spend on an expensive ticket, which is a sign of the times to come too.”

“The whole fees issue is obviously ongoing and out there. As a union we are bringing in two new tenants and going about it that way by improving what we

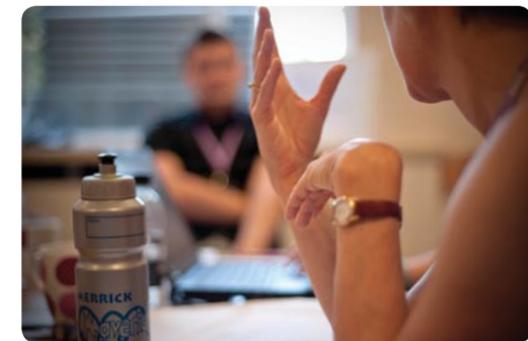


have. In terms of students themselves we have a job agency and whereas before some jobs would have been missed out on by students as they are offered to the Job Centre, we now provide those job links to students so that they can get those jobs. It is more like the American model. Rather than taking the view we are defeated by it we are carrying on and being productive and making our product as sharp as it can be.”

The strategy for new revenue development is hoped to flourish with this kind of quality engagement with product and consumer that Dixon and her team have strived for and are still striving to build on. “We’re competing with the high street. We have to have quality products. When I first came here the quality of events wasn’t comparable to what we have now.” Yet in spite of the economic climate and other problems encountered, Dixon and her staff have worked with and lowered their handicaps to play in a scratch team.

“There was disappointment that we hadn’t sold the Ball event out,” Dixon honestly remembers. “On the actual day itself it poured down, it was like monsoon rain. All day we knew it was coming and then, the rain came. Having said that the attitudes of our staff were absolutely fabulous. One of them was driving around a golf buggy, hood up, soaked to the skin but waving and smiling and that sums up our staff completely. At times like that we try to think how we can do better next time if the same thing did happen. The main thing was that our staff remained positive and the students had a great time.”

Solidarity and collaboration are words



synonymous with the LUU manifesto or ‘vision’. Impressively the action plan as set out online is surprisingly and reassuringly transparent, detailing exactly at which stage all parts of the plan are at, whether achieved or not. One particularly pressing point and key tool of communication has not performed as well as Dixon would have liked, the target for referendum being 3,500 for 2009 and the reality standing at a stubborn 2,093. Does this mean that student sabbatical officers are not directly relevant to the students at Leeds?

“I think that the officers are directly relevant to students. The referendum and increasing voting turnout is a big issue for them. We have plans in place across the union to do that. I also think it’s a reflection of what’s happening in wider society.

“Having said that other universities are still increasing turnout figures better than we are. In that respect there are lessons to be learnt from other student unions and we could do more to increase



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the officers and voting's profile. We don't have our internet portal up and running so I think we missed a trick there." Certainly the University of Sheffield's poll performance soared this year as a record 6,000 students used their vote in the officer elections. Revealingly a massive 4,500 online votes made up the referendum.

Tellingly, the majority of the points on the plan are accomplished and the remaining listed for completion. For sure, Dixon is ambitious.

"I'm leaving at the end of September and one of my colleagues will step in as Chief Executive; my post will go out to adverts." Is anyone already being considered internally? "Perhaps there are one or two who will apply from within, but the right and proper thing is to advertise, that's not to say there aren't people who already work for the Union who are good enough. When we do recruit we are most interested in people who have the right attitude and outlook, we can train other skills in. We do offer CPD but we are looking to be more structured about that and we are spending more on training. An organisation can't be great without great people. We look for raw talent."

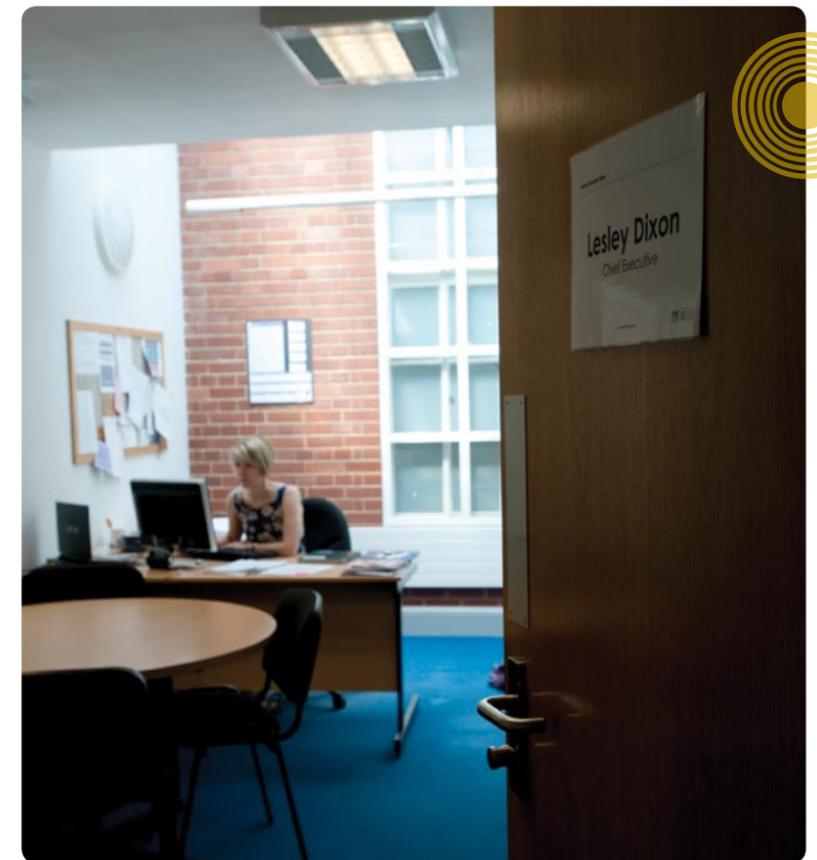
In addition to Dixon's experience as General Manager at three other reputable unions (the University of London Union, London Met Union and King's College London Students' Union), her talent for innovation has established roots in other directions. "I'm going to a charity in Liverpool, PSS (Personal Service Society), which works with those disadvantaged in society, for example children whose parents misuse drugs and alcohol."

Described as an 'innovative, empowering charity... with the ethos of pioneering new ways of delivering services', it would appear that Dixon is the epitome of its key elements. "It will be a step up for me in terms of the size of the operation and totally different to what I do now, it will definitely require a lot of learning but it is a great challenge and I am looking forward to it."

"It will be my first job outside of student unions; it is right for me to leave and right for the organisation because I've been there for nine years so it's probably time for a fresh approach for the union."

Dixon is shrewd when sharing the challenges and key lessons which she has learnt as a result. "I think that there is a tendency for student unions to think that they are unique organisations and to believe that there are no others like them. I think that's wrong. We have more in common with other charity sector organisations rather than being set apart from them. We embrace being part of that and make the most of our contacts in that respect. More student unions would benefit from doing that."

"The biggest challenge personally and also with the team was a few years ago. The financial forecast was that if we continued at the rate at which we were going we would run out of money a few years down the line. We wouldn't have let that happen so we had to make some voluntary redundancies. That was a really hard time. Up until then we were growing and



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growing and we had to put the brakes on.

"It was a real flashpoint for us but we came out of it. They were changes which should have been made a bit earlier. I learnt a lot about myself at that time and how to tackle things head on. I realised that I let things show in my emotions and I shouldn't have. I needed to remain strong for my team and for the organisation."

The quintessence of innovation and business flair, Dixon is a dichotomy whose corporate edge meets an ethical centre which connects with students and staff on a pastoral level. "I'm really proud of the organisation and of the people within the organisation" she says. Impervious to adversity and committed to the vision, Lesley Dixon is attestation that higher education and the student experience can change for the better. ●

Student Contributors

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