



Report for International Student Union – Stavanger Branch

Overview

The International Students' Union (ISU) of the University of Stavanger (UiS), hereafter referred to as ISU, an organization that recently celebrated its first anniversary, represents the interests of approximately 200 international students at UiS, a university located in the most international city in Norway. ISU is actively engaged in improving the general welfare of its membership and has developed a solid reputation for organizing social, cultural, and athletics events on campus and in the greater community. Beyond these core competencies, ISU is presently involved in an active campaign to raise the prominence of international students and their issues at UiS, including extending cooperation with the administration, the Norwegian Students' Union (SToR), the International Office, and other organizations on campus. The long-term objective is for ISU to become a full-service student union, comparable in most every regard to our Norwegian counterpart.

Rewind

Following the official transfer of power to the Board elected in August of 2004, the forthcoming months were marked by a series of achievements and setbacks for the organization. On the first front, the ISU organized several well-attended events on campus, in particular an international night where students were able to sample cuisine, culture, and music from around the globe. On the second front, ISU struggled in communicating its activities and programs for international students and arguably failed in its charge to develop a strong presence among international students or within the broader campus community.

Such situation set the organization at a crossroads that opened up a dialogue not only within the ISU Government, but also among the international student community as a whole. The consensus among all concerned was that the ISU should strive to organize more activities, but also such activities needed to be better communicated among students. After further investigation, it was found that while all those involved within the ISU Government dearly had the organization's best interests at heart, it was struggling under a Constitution that left officers unsure about their duties and responsibilities.

An informal commission was assembled to develop amendments to the Constitution designed to provide greater clarity on the role of members in the organization and other matters that had been left gravely silent in the original document. Due to the time constraint of a scheduled General Assembly in February and the need to post the document well in advance of this meeting, it was decided to address the most chronic concerns at this time and to follow up with a more complete revision and polishing in the period between the middle of February and our next General Assembly scheduled for August 2005.

While clarity was the greatest single outcome of the Constitution amendments, the most significant change to the organization was the ISU Government was expanded to 17 members. This structure was chosen for the following reasons: 1) to expand diversity of the Government and to include a greater number of students in decision-making processes; 2) to delegate tasks

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and objectives more clearly and easily to officers, especially in the forthcoming years as we build the organization; 3) to accommodate for the transitory nature of international students, both in terms of their frequency to travel, but also in terms of turnover; 4) research revealed 15-21 members is the standard for many student government organizations.

Despite said changes being adopted by the General Assembly on the 5th of February 2005, it became evident the greater problem within ISU was a matter of leadership. There were concerns about divisiveness, an unwillingness or inability to share information either within the Government or across the membership, a limited vision for the spring semester and beyond, and a lack of knowledge or respect for either version of the Constitution. In the February elections, the former President was defeated by a 5-1 margin while all other members of the Government were elected back to their previous office or a new position created due to the change in organizational structure. A record 77 persons voted in our election.

The present orientation of ISU has been to revive ISU and to significantly expand its role on campus. The first mission has been to improve communications. Informal class representatives were created in order that events are announced in predominantly international classes in addition to an active campaign to get students to sign up to our mailing list. Our Secretary of Communications is presently engaged on quadrupling the number of ISU bulletin boards on campus and our two webmasters have been busy for weeks rolling out what we believe will easily be the best ISU website in Norway, both in terms of design and information that is available to users. We are presently in negotiations with the university to get the domain www.isu.uis.no and a sizeable amount of hosting space. We have also gained access to the university television monitors which will allow us yet another venue to advertise.

But seeing is believing, at least in the eyes of the membership. Rather than organize activities once a month, the standard of the previous semester, the current government has been organizing an average of 1-2 events per week, a number that we anticipate to rise to 3-4 in the forthcoming weeks. Among our most popular events in the past weeks have been a bowling night, a Special Assembly, and two well-attended parties. The emphasis has been to get the word out, bring people in, and do as much as we can with our limited budget.

One event that is worth highlighting is our one-year anniversary party that had approximately 100 persons in attendance, including several members of the university faculty and staff. Due to the way ISU was able to market the event to the university, this anniversary celebration was almost entirely paid for outside of ISU funds.

Challenges

At present one of our greatest challenges has been to get a suitable office accommodation on campus. Although ISU has been promised an office in the new university main building that will open in January 2006, we are presently situated in a dilapidated building on the far corner of campus. There are presently several offices in the main building that are unused, but we have met both hostility and indifference in our effort to relocate to an office that is remotely visible to students.

We have also been slowed in the process of securing an office phone, computer, and other essential office equipment. While it does appear we shall secure these items this semester, it is

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proving to be a longer process than we anticipated. The Norwegian Students' Union is also campaigning on our behalf.

A final point of potential impasse has been our student newspaper, *Hugin*. We have formally petitioned the newspaper staff, editor, and SIS, their source of funding, to include an article published in English in each issue. While this is a minor request, although one we feel strongly about considering this is just one of many ways the University of Stavanger excludes international students, we have encountered an Editor-in-Chief who is greatly opposed to the idea, whether there be funding or not.

We have put together a commission on Diversity and Discrimination which shall issue a formal report in the following months in regard to the state of the campus, what areas the university and/or the Norwegian Students' Union can improve, and what the specific remedies or solutions might be. Such a commission was assembled due to the feeling of many an international student in Stavanger that they feel there is a wall between international & Norwegian students, not to mention some blatant instances of discrimination we have encountered and reported.

Finally, the internal quest for any organization is to keep the momentum going from year to year and to try to guard against having the officers that come after us making all the same missteps of previous officers. We are addressing the latter issue on three fronts: 1) Constitutional amendments that further clarify the roles, responsibilities, rights, and restrictions of the officers and membership; 2) creating a Policy and Procedures handbook for those issues that do not belong in the Constitution; 3) having each officer put together a small handbook that will be passed on to their successor.

Upcoming Events

In terms of events scheduled for this Spring, ISU has generally broken them down into three categories: social, cultural, and athletics. Each one of these broad categories is supervised by an officer who are overseen by a Secretary of Activities. Over the past several weeks an activities calendar has been created which will be made available to the students in printed form as a brochure, published on the new website, and be sent directly via email.

Events are also broken down into two other broad categories: 1) weekly or ongoing activities; and 2) special events. The former is comprised of events such as ongoing athletics leagues and tournaments, "traditional games over coffee," "New Amigos," a socializing event held in the city at an international restaurant, and so forth. The latter ranges from several trips in Rogaland County to parties and concerts. The point is to offer variety and to bring students together, a plan we anticipate to meet with our extensive program. A number of these events will be advertised to Norwegian students, a first step in developing cross-cultural acceptance and on campus integration.

In terms of Norwegian-International relations, we have an officer assigned specifically to this role and one outcome for students coming to Stavanger in the fall of 2005 will be a mentor program, where Norwegian students can volunteer to "adopt" an international student. This program is still in development, but will be soon launched and advertised in preparation for the upcoming academic year.

At the same time we will be advertising our Goods Exchange initiative, a program where both International and Norwegian students can donate kitchen wares and other goods that may be

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useful to international students. Likewise, international students will be encouraged to donate any items that they might otherwise leave in Norway, such as pots, pans, utensils, and so forth. The ISU shall distribute these goods at the beginning of each semester according to interest and need.

Budget

In the previous year, ISU was allocated a budget of 30,000 NOK. We were informed this month that our budget has been trimmed to 17,500 NOK, a reality that reflects the growing number of organizations competing for scarce funds on campus, but also a period of rather modest activity in the previous semester. We have been informed, however, that the university is willing to fund special events outside the limits of our budget, much in the same manner that occurred with our anniversary party. Moreover, it looks probable that we will be receiving a computer and other office equipment free of charge from the university, equipment we might otherwise have to pay for if given a larger budget. Nonetheless, our goal is to be as active and visible as possible in order that the university will consider all funding requests submitted, both in the short- and long-run.

/Joshua H. Juel (USA), President

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