

5 easy
steps

to starting a
**secular
student
society**

national
secular
society

Starting your own society at university can seem daunting.

But it's easier than you think.

The exact details of how to start your society will vary from one place to another but there are common elements to all of them. This 5-step plan will help you set up and run a successful Secular Society.

And if you do run into any problems, the National Secular Society is here to help. You can email us at: admin@secularism.org.uk
or call us on
020 7404 3126
10am-5pm Monday to Friday.

step 1

OFFICIAL BUSINESS

Officers

You'll need three officers to organise and run your society:

1. **President/Chair:** to run meetings, co-ordinate planning and generally head up the society. He or she will be the public face of the society.
2. **Finance Officer/Treasurer:** He or she will set up the society bank account, collect membership fees and donations, keep an eye on the budget and pay for events (and hopefully bank the profits after). They will also need to fill out the income/ expenditure spreadsheet and report the club's financial activities over the year to the Student Union (See Appendix A).

You need to agree in advance what the signatory arrangements are on the bank account, usually any two of the officers, certainly for large amounts. Ask your union officials for advice on how to maximise funding and about grants from the university

3. **Secretary:** Your society's administrator. The Secretary makes agendas and records the minutes of your meetings. They keep members informed of what is going on and can also be responsible for setting up and running the mailing list.

There are other people you can involve, for example webmaster, publicity officer, social secretary and membership secretary (who would deal with the mailing list/database). Some people may turn up to every meeting and be a reliable volunteer but not want to be an officer so if you have specific tasks, you can delegate to them.

In order to make sure your meetings run smoothly, it's a good idea to have separate, regular committee meetings with the officers and key volunteers. The secretary should set the agenda and take minutes at these meetings. Appendix B has a sample agenda.

Naming your Group

Try to pick a name that sums up who you are and what you intend to do. You may be a secular group, an atheist group or a secular atheist humanist action group, for example. Check that no other group in college has the same initials. Design a logo and make sure you get permission for any images you use. For legal reasons, you can't use the NSS logo but we do have specially designed student ones that you can use. Brand everything you do to make your presence felt – leaflets, posters, T-shirts, banners, website, Facebook and so on.

The Constitution

This is the document that will determine what your group is and what it intends to do. It can be changed as you go along but it's a good idea to have something set out from the start. Many universities have minimum constitution requirements in order for a group to be ratified; these include things like holding an AGM and keeping financial records. It should also name your officers and contain rules on how you will run your elections. Before you embark on drawing it up, check with your Union to see what's needed.

AGM

This is the main meeting of your society, held once a year. It's when you elect officers, review your aims and objectives and get feedback from members.

Make your society's presence felt with leaflets, posters, T-shirts, banners, website, Facebook...

step 2

RECRUITING MEMBERS

Most universities require a minimum membership of a club or society. Find out from your student union how many it is at your university.

A membership and mailing list lets you build up a network of supporters and helps you spread the word when you're running a campaign or planning an event. It's important to keep this up to date. It's best to have a pre-printed sign-up sheet when you're out recruiting. Make sure that people's email address is legible!

You need to decide if you are going to charge for membership. It can put off potential new members but if your events are cheaper for members than non-members, then there will be a tangible benefit. Also, if people pay an annual membership, they have made an investment which should keep them coming back. As an added incentive, you could give them a badge, for example.

You can also join the NSS for the student rate of £9 a year or affiliate your group for £29 a year.

There are several good ways to sign people up:

Freshers Fair

Having a stall at Freshers Fair is by far the most effective way of recruiting. The Student Union will usually provide you with a table on request. Set up your table with sign-up sheets, flyers and posters. Put up a sign with the name of your Society above the stall. You can get free flyers and posters from the NSS if you contact the office, as well as copies of our magazine, the Bulletin. Get the officers to staff the stall, hand out literature, and talk to people. Whatever you do, don't sit behind the table waiting for them to come to you! Stand up, be active and easy to approach.

One way to attract attention at Freshers Fair is to give out the NSS Certificate of Debaptism. Have a big poster saying Get De-baptised Here, and give out the certificates as members sign up.

Campus sign-up

Another way of getting members, if you've missed Freshers Fair for example, is to do sign-ups on campus. Go with a clipboard and sign-up sheets to somewhere you know there'll be people, and attract attention to your society. Or contact existing societies where there may be like-minded people. For example, philosophy, political or scientific societies.

Trying asking questions like:

"Do you think people should get special treatment from the Government because they're religious?"

"Do you think religions can be a problem if they try to force people to act in a certain way?"

"Do you think children should be labelled with the religion of their parents?"

Most reasonable people will give the right answer to these questions. Tell them that's what you're campaigning for, and ask them to sign up.

Notice boards

You could put sign-up sheets on college notice boards along walk-ways and in departments. If they're bold enough, or have a poster for your society above them, they might get some attention. This is a very work-intensive way of getting sign-ups, but it can pay dividends if you keep plugging away.

Flyers

Flyers setting out your aims and core principles like the one in Appendix C are a good way to raise your profile and bring in new members. Alternatively, you can make single issue flyers or leaflets dealing with an issue relevant to your college or society at large – for example, religion and sex, faith schools or freedom of expression.

Once you've got the requisite number of members signed up, and hopefully many more than you need, you can fill in your contact list and notify the Student Union of your membership.

Keeping in touch with members

Once you've got people interested, you can keep their interest by sending out a weekly or fortnightly newsletter. This could contain news of events, issues on campus, news stories (which you can get from the NSS website What the Papers Say section to save time). You can also sign people up to Newslite, our free weekly email newsletter, on our website.

www.secularism.org.uk/newsline.html

Set up a Facebook page for your group. Not only is this a good way to publicize events, it creates a sense of community. The Friends of the National Secular Society page on Facebook is there to let you share ideas with other student groups, publicize your events, talk about any problems and generally compare notes.

step 3

MEETINGS

Your first meeting

This is where you lay out your wares to new and potential members.

- Introduce the group, its purpose and your plans for the coming term and year.
- Introduce the officers.
- talk about the movement your group is part of – what is secularism?
- Ask for feedback from everyone there.

It's important at every meeting to make newcomers feel welcome so you could have a designated meeter and greeter. This serves two purposes; it makes someone feel like part of the community and also gives you a chance to get their details for your mailing list.

Events

Check out the cost of room hire, stationery, buying badges, posters and other necessities. Generally, on-campus room hire will be free, but it's worth checking – ask a Union rep about this. Printing may cost as little as 1p per sheet of A4 but if you are doing a lot of flyers or event publicity, this can mount up. Stationery costs will include things like postage and packaging.

Remember to keep good control of events, especially the AGM. Always make sure events have at least 2 officers involved, and one chairing.

You might want to think about event timing. For example, some Universities have Wednesday as a half-day – events on Wednesday evening are typically poorly attended at these Universities, because students have gone off campus.

If you need material to hand out at meetings to explain secularism or advertise the NSS – feel free to ask us – we're more than happy to help.

If you have decided to charge for membership, or are charging for an event, make sure you have a cash box and a float near the door – and someone to take charge of it, either the Treasurer or a designated volunteer.

If you are going to buy badges etc from the NSS to re-sell then you will need some capital to cover the initial outlay. Decide how much you are going to charge for items. You will have to cover your costs without making items so expensive it puts people off buying them.

The two main expenses will probably be speakers and events. You will normally need to offer speakers travel expenses (if you are lucky, they will turn them down, especially if they are from a large organisation).

Event costs will be mostly for drinks and food. Try doing a rough estimate per head to give you some idea.

Some Ideas for Events

Grill an Atheist/Secularist

This one has proven really popular in the past. It involves setting up a panel and fielding questions on Secularism and/or Atheism. It gets people involved and it's non-confrontational, despite the name.

Speakers

It's always useful to hold a lecture on secularism, or a secular issue. People are sometimes confused about what being secular is – what it stands for. The NSS may be able to provide speakers in your area.

Or you could ask professors and staff at your University to talk about what they do. Part of secularism is the promotion of science and rationalism. Learning the basics of, for example, evolution or Big Bang theory may help you in debates. A talk on logic and spotting the flaws in people's arguments could stand you in good stead too. Try biology, zoology, physics, anthropology, philosophy, law, politics and theology.

Some of your members may also prove to be good speakers.

If you book a speaker, don't forget to confirm the week before that they are still available. It's a good idea to get a landline and mobile number from them as well as an email address. Some organisers even call the night before or morning of the meeting. If the speaker needs someone to meet them from a station, make sure that

A membership and mailing list lets you build up a network of supporters and helps you spread the word.

For less formal debates all you need is someone to chair them and keep order, then everyone can join in.

person knows exactly when to be there and how to identify the speaker. It's a good idea to write and thank speakers too. This is likely to make them more willing to come again.

Joint events

Contact your college's religious groups, philosophy, biology, anthropology and political societies, women's groups, LGBT groups and law groups. Joint events mean that costs are shared both for the event and for publicity - and they're a good way of meeting new people and getting to grips with different points of view.

Debates

Subjects you could debate include:

- Women's reproductive rights: Abortion, contraception, HPV vaccine, right to referral if doctor/pharmacist has conscientious objection.
- Gay rights: threatened by religion, e.g. exemptions from equality legislation.
- Medical ethics: euthanasia, stem cell research
- AIDS: condoms, abstinence, religious charities who only give money to abstinence-promoting groups.
- Education: faith schools funded by tax payers, compulsory worship, RE, the teaching of creationism, problems for social cohesion in single faith schools.
- Freedom of expression – religious attempts to stifle debate, attacks on the arts, self-censorship through fear, defamation of religion, Human Rights protect individuals, not organisations/ideas.
- Separation of Church and State: What does it mean? To everyone's advantage, guarantees religious freedom, not an attack on religion. Example of USA.
- Islamophobia – Does criticism of a belief does equal racism?

Most Universities have a debating society – you could join, or get in touch with the officers with ideas for debates. For less formal debates all you need is someone to chair them and keep order, then everyone can join in.

Whatever the structure of your debate, it's unlikely that anyone there will change their mind on the night but it's important for people to hear all sides of an argument and to meet people from different groups. Someone from a religious group may never have been exposed to atheists en masse before, for example.

Film shows

These are a good way to bring in members and non-members. Most universities will let you use a lecture room and their projector. You can show movies and documentaries then have a discussion of the issues raised.

Social Events

These are a good way of getting to know people, and might be a great idea to kick-off your society for the year. Cheap drink and snacks are always a good puller.

Other Society's Events

Religious societies hold lots of lectures and talks and such like – why don't you let your membership know about them – and make sure a secular voice is heard? Spread the word by going to relevant talks in philosophy, law or science societies too.

Days Out

As well as meeting-based events, there are trips out like a visit to a museum or exhibition, marches, rallies and other local events where you can hand out leaflets, carry banners or run a stall.

step 4

SPREAD THE WORD

Growing your membership is such an important aim, to make sure the secular message gets heard by as many people as possible. It pays to advertise.

Posters for each event

Your Union will probably have cheap design and printing facilities for posters and flyers – use them to full effect when holding an event. Be bold and controversial in your advertising – but within University rules.

Flyers

Flyers setting out your aims and core principles like the one in Appendix C are a good way to raise your profile and bring in new members. Alternatively, you can make single issue flyers or leaflets dealing with an issue relevant to your college or society at large – for example, religion and sex, faith schools or freedom of expression.

Write to your college newspaper

Your college newspaper will have a far higher readership than your email list, or a poster campaign. It's also much less effort to get something printed there. They'll probably charge for advertising space – but letter-writing on topical secular issues at University is free of charge. Make sure you encourage your members and officers to do so.

Respond to secular issues in your university

Responding to student issues is important. For example – extremism or freedom of expression on campus is a big issue in the press. Use the above methods to get your message heard about these sorts of issues. If something is becoming a major issue, you could even hold an event to talk about it, or highlight it.

Respond to secular issues in your area

If there is something happening in your area – a new faith school being built, the local bishop saying something contentious, a play on a controversial subject for example, you could write to the local paper, organise a demo, hand out leaflets in the shopping centre and so on.

Always be ready to sign up new members

At every event you hold, take a sign-up sheet and a pen. The more members you have, the more your funding and influence is likely to increase, and the better attended your events will be. Even when you're writing letters to your college newspaper, remember to include your society's email address or contact details so that people can get in touch with you if they sympathise with your views – or even if they don't.

Get involved in the community

Help publicize blood-donor events, volunteer at a local soup kitchen for homeless people or, if you're in the right area, get involved with Camp Quest. Religious groups are always publicizing their charitable works.

Tell us about your group

Affiliate your group to the NSS and we'll add your group contact details to our affiliated group's page. Send us photos and reports of events and we'll post them on our website.

Go national and international

The AHS is an umbrella organisation for secular students where you can share ideas and get involved in bigger campaigns.

www.ahsstudents.org.uk

There is also the Secular Student Alliance in America who can be a good source of ideas and support.

www.secularstudents.org

The more members you have, the more your funding and influence is likely to increase.

step 5

PLAN AHEAD

A lot of societies start with great energy and purpose but once the first set of officers leaves, they run out of energy. You can avoid this by making sure you elect replacements (and hold your AGM) well before the end of the summer term so that the existing officers have time to hand over the reins and make sure that everyone knows who will be running the group the following year.

Always be on the look-out for your own successor, encourage them to volunteer and attend meetings, and teach them how to do your job. If only one person in

your group knows how to do something and they are ill or leave college, then you're stuck. Share information and knowledge to avoid this.

The National Secular Society will be able to help you at every stage – it gets easier and more successful every year you do it. Feel free to contact us with any questions, or if you have any suggestions to how to improve this guide.

And good luck, your efforts are much appreciated; you're doing a hugely important job!

Running a Student Secular Society gets easier and more successful every year you do it. The NSS will be able to help you at every stage.

Appendix A SAMPLE SPREADSHEET

SAMPLE SHEET

EXPENDITURE

| Date | Receipt Number | Item | Cost |
|--------|----------------|-------------------------|---------|
| 04-Oct | 1 | Stationery | £ 9.99 |
| 07-Oct | 2 | Printing leaflets | £ 40.50 |
| 14-Oct | 3 | Badges | £ 15.75 |
| 27-Oct | 4 | Stamps | £ 5.45 |
| | | Month Total | £ 71.69 |
| 03-Nov | 1 | Poster printing | £ 20.00 |
| 08-Nov | 2 | Room hire | £ 25.00 |
| 11-Nov | 3 | Speaker's expenses | £ 35.00 |
| 22-Nov | 4 | Drinks for social event | £ 60.00 |
| | | Month Total | £ 80.00 |

Notes: Always number your receipts in order. Keep the receipts for each month in a separate envelope.

If you can't get a receipt for something, write one yourself and get one of your officers to sign it.

If you have a bank account and pay for something by cheque, write the cheque number on the receipt.

INCOME

| Date | Receipt Number | Item | Amount |
|--------|----------------|--------------------------------|----------|
| 04-Oct | 1 | Donation | £ 50.00 |
| 20-Oct | 2 | Sale of badges | £ 25.00 |
| 22-Oct | 3 | Funding from college | £ 200.00 |
| | | Month Total | £ 275.00 |
| 05-Nov | 1 | Membership subscriptions | £ 100.00 |
| 23-Nov | 2 | Sale of drinks at social event | £ 90.00 |
| | | Month Total | £ 190.00 |

Notes: Keep the money in a locked tin if you do not have a bank account.

If you do have one, write the number of the paying-in slip in the Receipts column.

At the end of the academic year. Total up Income and Expenditure.

If you need any help keeping your accounts, call the NSS office on 020 7404 3126.

Write everything down!

Appendix B SAMPLE AGENDA

Committee Meeting

to be held in _____ (location)

on _____ (date) at _____ (time)

Agenda

1. Apologies
2. Minutes of previous meeting
3. Matters arising from minutes of previous meeting
4. President's Report
5. Finance Report
7. Membership Report/Mailing List
8. Events
9. Any other business

Appendix C LEAFLET EXAMPLE

Do you want a society where Human Rights come before religious rights?

A society where religious leaders do not have the power to dictate how we live our lives?

A society where everyone has equal rights and freedom of expression?

So do we.

Secularists want a society where religion is a personal matter, separate from politics, education and healthcare. Everyone should be free to believe whatever they choose – or nothing at all – without it bringing them any advantage or disadvantage. We want a society where science, healthcare and rational thought are not threatened or undermined by irrational belief systems. A society where people are free to talk openly, to be creative and to disagree with others' views without fear of condemnation or legal sanction.

Secularists don't want a society where unelected religious leaders can influence political decisions, where faith schools funded by taxpayers' money deepen cultural and racial divides and teach creationism as a valid alternative to evolution, or where people who choose to live without religion are treated as second-class citizens.

Attempts to introduce sharia threaten to undermine democratic law – women particularly stand to lose their rights.

In the UK recently, religious groups tried to win exemption from equal rights legislation that would stop them discriminating against lesbians and gays. They demand exemptions the laws that the rest of us must obey.

In the UK, only 7% of adults go to church regularly and yet 25 unelected and all-male Anglican bishops sit in the House of Lords.

Religious groups try to stop artistic expression, sometimes with threats and menaces, even when they have not seen the cause of 'offence'. For example, Sikhs forcing the closure of a play at Birmingham Rep, the death sentence on Salman Rushdie, the Danish cartoons or Jerry Springer – the Opera.

In Africa, more than 30 million people have HIV/AIDS while international religious leaders and religiously-motivated aid agencies try to prevent the use of condoms and even lie about their effectiveness.

If you want to live in an open, equal and just society...

If you want to oppose the activities of extremist religious groups on campus...

If you think that the only fair society is a secular society...

Join us.

"The secular path is the one that civil society must take if it is to have any hope of survival."
— Christopher Hitchens

www.secularism.org.uk

national
secular
society

Download this leaflet as an A4 PDF [here](#)

National Secular Society, 25 Red Lion Square, London WC1R 4RL

Tel: (020) 7404 3126

Fax: 0870 762 8971

admin@secularism.org.uk

www.secularism.org.uk