Making Student Members' Meetings Work

I think student members' meetings can be wonderful as an opportunity for unions to be transparent and celebrate the astonishing work that students do. I also think that their focus is too often based on legislation and financial compliance presented in a dry way that means it is no surprise that people don't engage.

During 2025 and 2026, alongside Wonkhe, I helped a number of unions develop plans for improving this. This resource is a fruit of that work.

Thanks are due to Middlesex Students' Union, Reading University Students' Union and Warwick Students' Union. They've shown that it is possible to do something exciting and student-led in this space.

Please get in touch (details at the end) if you have thoughts or questions. I hope what follows is useful.

Nick Smith

Stage 1 – Start with students and start early

Running through this guide is a common theme: student members' meetings should be led by, and delivered by student members, not officers or staff.

Lots of these meetings can be about "The Union" (meaning officers or trustees) giving an update on what they do to students, rather than student members talking about what the union has done for them. This shift in approach is fundamental.

Engaging with student members across your union will probably involve asking different departments in the union for support. When you get to stage 6 (see below), you'll want this to include lots of different types of student.

Did a student group or individual accomplish something really cool in Freshers week? Ask that students if they'd want to be a part of a members' meeting in the future and keep them top of mind. Sports team do well in the season? Mention the members meeting in a congratulatory email.

Good planning helps success here so we'd recommend you are planning early in the academic year.

Stage 2 – Timings and invitations

An assumption here is that you are doing a single, annual student members' meeting. You may be doing more, but the focus of this guide is on that single point of celebration and accountability.

This yearly meeting presents the annual accounts of the union to the members. For this reason, you will want to know when the annual audit will be finished and when the Trustee Board approve the accounts. For most unions this is done at some point early in the spring, but it can also be before Christmas.

Your union's articles, constitution or byelaws (your governing documents) should lay out the notice required for the members' meeting. This is usually something like 14 days. In

practice, therefore, the earliest that you can hold the meeting is 3 or 4 weeks after the trustee board approve the accounts.

It is worth setting the annual members' meeting date as soon as you can. Most unions will set their trustee dates and audit 12-18 months ahead, so you should have a sense of when these will be. You'll also want to consider things like examination dates, religious holidays and big events like elections and varsity when putting something in the calendar.

Give some thought early about the venue. Unions will be restrained by space and capacity but think what can be done to make this feel different from a lecture or other formal presentation. This might mean hosting it cabaret style, dressing the space like an awards ceremony with banners and tablecloths, perhaps using university conference spaces rather than a lecture theatre.

Incentives and Food

If your approach is about putting students in the driving seat you probably don't need to include drinks vouchers or shop discounts for them to attend. Catering events allows people to mix and chat informally (the word companion meaning "to break bread with") but this could also be a student led activity – with a range of cultural groups providing street food or dishes for attendees. You will need to book this in advance whatever you decide on catering.

Save the date!

Once you've got your date, you can get it into calendars. This should include all of the officers and staff members of the union, as well as lay and student trustees. You should also include senior management of the university, sports and society presidents, course and faculty representatives, liberation committee members, volunteers, student media, other local students' unions and volunteer groups, local councillors... anyone you can think of! Send electronic calendar invitations alongside emails to help secure the date.

Don't underestimate a physical reminder, too. A personalised postcard handed out to sports committee members as they come and file expenses, or sent to representatives 6 weeks before the meeting, can make a big difference.

Your student media have an obvious place to report on the event but get them involved early in promoting the event, interviewing speakers and trailing content on the radio.

A shout out to communication and marketing colleagues here. Make sure you engage them *early* and explain what you are hoping to achieve – share this briefing!

Stage 3 – The rules

You should check your governing documents to see if there are any additional rules about holding the meeting. For example, they might have to be in person, or online in no more than 3 places. They may have a certain quorum (the minimum number of people who must attend).

At this point, we'd recommend holding an in person event if at all possible. The aim with this student members' meeting is to create a community and a buzz that is hard to replicate online. This isn't always possible, though — see the section below on online sessions.

Secondly, the best way to ensure quorum is to get people involved. If all of the content is delivered by 3 officers, then you can guarantee 3 officers will attend. If you involve a dozen students and each of them brings two friends to watch, you are on the way to 50 attendees without trying.

On the day, you should do some practice exercises with attendees at the start on how the meeting will run. It's highly likely that some students won't know what to do when you ask them to "approve the minutes", or even what minutes are! You could do some mock votes on non-controversial issues (is it better to stay in or go out?, who is the better of 2 bands? etc.) to get people used to what you'll be asking them to do later.

Stage 4 – The finances

As part of the 1994 Education Act, a union must present their accounts to the student members once a year. This usually involves a presentation by a staff member or an SU officer. Here are some of our suggestions to improve this section of the meeting, ordered from easiest to most difficult.

1) Make sure you have a visual presentation alongside the accounts. This could be a slide that covers where the union gets its money, a second on how it spends it, a third on what it owns and a fourth on trends for these over the past 3 years. Pie or bar charts are your friend here.
2) Rather than brief an officer to present the accounts, get a student trustee to do it. They'll need the same sort of support as an officer, but involves someone else from the board (and a student member).
3) Have the finance student society present the finances (with support from the Auditors or finance team). The trustees should answer questions, but this gives students the opportunity to develop their skills and adds another set of voices to the meeting.
4) Create bingo cards for attendees based on the information being presented (a mix of percentages for different expenditures, references to number of students or commercial sales). This helps to keep them listening and you can give out prizes for the first rows or columns completed.
5) Play "Higher or Lower" – is the percentage spent on student sports higher or lower than the sabbatical salaries? Is that higher or lower than the number of pints sold?

Between the approval of the accounts by the board and their presentation at the members meeting, you should be clear on who is going to speak and what briefing that they need and, if you are looking to include more interaction, how this will take place.

A reminder that the members' meeting itself doesn't need to approve the accounts, unless your rules require it, so this is worth checking.

Stage 5 – Affiliations

The 1994 Education Act requires students to approve the list of organisations that the union is affiliated to each year. The wording is unclear about whether students should approve the list (e.g. the record of who is affiliated) or the affiliations themselves. This is not legal advice, but as the same Act sets regulations for how a referendum on affiliations should take place, it would be reasonable to assume that that mechanism should be used to approve affiliations.

Many unions split affiliations that help them operate functions (umbrella organisations for advice or student activities) and those which are political or representative (Russell group SUs or the National Union of Students). You should be clear and prepared at your annual members meeting to list the organisations to which you are affiliated and their costs and explain how students can raise a concern and trigger a referendum on affiliation based on your rules.

Stage 6 – On the day, welcome and celebration

Many students won't have attended a meeting like this before, so think about the experience. This can be as simple as having people welcoming them as they arrive and explaining where they need to sit (and encouraging them to mix), having people already at tables who are willing to chat to folks and rolling screens giving timings and the planned business. Play music (from a student group perhaps) to welcome folks as they arrive.

Your rules might stipulate who has to chair the formal aspects of the meeting but give some thought to who might MC the rest. Is there someone who delivers a great pub quiz in the bar, a charismatic student radio presenter, or budding stand up comedian who could do this?

I've called this section "celebration", but it could also be "Trustees annual report" because, essentially, it is about showing the membership what has been achieved though the infrastructure of the board. Here are some suggestions about what can be done and how.

Student representation

- Have some class or school representatives talk about the wins they have achieved this year or campaigns they have been involved in.
- At Middlesex students' union they had faculty representatives presenting on how the experience had helped them personally, with the role developing their confidence and adding employability skills.
- The chair of your student council or other democratic forum can present on what policies for changing student life have been passed and what impact that has had in the lecture theatre and seminar rooms.
- Officers can present updates on manifesto pledges – although ensure this isn't disproportionate to student led presentations.

Student Activities

- A sports team could present on their work. At Warwick SU the fencing society explained how they adapted their programme to allow a combined group for disabled and able-bodied students.
- The last groups to win society and club of the year from the union can talk about what they did and how this was enhanced and supported by others within the SU.
- Entertainment can be provided by someone from a dance society, the student bands soc or other performing arts group.
- Ask students to produce the agenda for the day as a zine or other artwork.
- Student media can, of course, stream the event and report on the activity in the newspaper or magazine, perhaps facilitating some of the discussions and debates.
- Make sure you include the financial figures for how much has been given to student groups during the board's budget setting process.

Activism and student rights

- Reading SU used the opportunity of their members' meeting to talk in person to students about the (then) upcoming changes to tenancy law and their rights as renters.
- You could have a local trade union talk about the rights of workers in relation to casual work often undertaken by students or invite a group the union is engaging with on a shared goal, like better local transport, to talk about their collaborative work.
- The Sustainability forum presented on their lobbying work as supported by Warwick Students' Union at their members meeting.

Advice

- Students' unions do amazing things in the field of advice, but they (rightly) need to approach it with confidentiality and sensitivity. You can include data on how many people come to the advice centre and the sort of issues that they face but maybe ask the drama society to perform some of the case studies and the impact – e.g. taking a student who was worried after being wrongly accused of plagiarism and the relief after the SU's intervention.

Employability

- Got an alumni who can track their career back to a students' union opportunity? Have them be interviewed by a current student doing the same to share differences and similarities.
- During breaks the photography society can take headshots for people to update their LinkedIn profiles and maybe you can have the careers' advisors come so that people can book in sessions.

Awards

- It's right that most awards are chosen for students by their peers but perhaps have a trustees' prize for a particular person or group that has contributed to the SU. This could be presented at the student members meeting and again creates a link between the board and the students.
- If your union offers honorary life membership, then the annual meeting is an ideal opportunity for this to offered publicly as a thank you to the recipients.

These are just a few ideas to get you started but hopefully you can see the potential here for your union.

Stage 7 – concerns and risks of the union

It is possible that your members don't know things, but they aren't stupid. As this document is being drafted there is international conflict impacting oil, food costs are rising due to climate change and funding in many universities is perilous. Your board will be discussing this and the impact it will have on the work of the Union and your members should probably know, too.

Explaining to students what issues may emerge for their SU may help to later explain why society accounts have to be frozen or the meal deal price has increased. Trust students with the "why" as well as the "what".

Stage 8 – Trustee questions

There's a ruder version of this analogy, but someone once said that if your business is cows then you should spend at least some time amongst the cows. Similarly, if the job of trustees is to work to support students, then they should spend some time with them. Accountability is so important for trustees that it is both a Nolan principle (have a search online) and one of the core duties of the Charity Commission and Scottish Charity Regulator.

Accountability doesn't need to be about the trustees sitting behind a table on stage and taking questions (though it can be). You could also have trustees sit amongst the student members on different tables to hear from students. Some unions have questions submitted via post-its during the meeting or texted in.

You should give consideration to this section in advance. There might be particular issues likely to come up (e.g. changes to funding in the past year, when the board has stepped in on a democratic issue, when there has been close election results for full time officers) that you can pre-empt answers to and have prepared. There may also be questions that you don't have the answer to then and there. That is completely fine/reasonable. Acknowledge the question, and plan for capturing these, setting time aside in the week after the meeting to prepare a response and publicise the response on your website.

Stage 9 – student motions

Many unions will have the opportunity for student members to submit motions to the annual meeting as well. I can't hope to cover every democratic process here, but there are a few things that might be worth bearing in mind.

1) If your union doesn't normally do large scale discussions and instead uses small forums you might want to prepare for what this looks like in a larger setting. What are the processes that need to be in place? Who will be the chair?
2) Members meetings may be able to overturn decisions of other bodies within the students' unions, such as student council. Motions here may also be submitted by people who aren't as used to the regulations and boundaries of the union. In both cases you should take care to speak to proposal submitters about this before they get to the meeting themselves – for example, if their proposal wouldn't be possible due to the union's purposes or some other legal reason. This will be similar to the work you do with council representatives at the start of the year.
3) I'm not here to do the political work of officers but when setting deadlines and communicating issues you should make sure officers have the time and space to support this. It's why members meetings at the same time as elections aren't a good idea because officers will have less time to explain things to students.

Stage 10 – follow up

Again, with your communications colleagues think about how you do throwbacks to the meeting a week or a month after it happened. Dedicate time to writing up the minutes and publishing them as well as providing the streamed content online. How else might you share what happened (social media, video, etc..)

Make sure you thank attendees and presenters before dropping the dates of the meeting next year!

Online Meetings

Some unions support student bodies that work over vast geographical areas or have a membership that require flexibility due to their status as commuters, workers or carers. In these instances, in person meetings may not be practical. Below are some suggestions to try and replicate the in person meetings spoken about above.

- For the celebrations, have different student groups prepare short 1 to 2 minute videos highlighting their work. Think about how bands introduce themselves for Eurovision. These can be shown instead of live performances.
- Use breakout rooms to replicate round table discussions, with a Trustee placed in each one. Even with 100 attendees, these can have a dozen or so in each space if all trustees attend.
- Have a chat mediator who is not presenting directly to keep an eye on comments and respond to discussions in the chat.
- Use online tools like online bingo card generators or other games to present the information virtually.

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