



SU Democratic Forum Research November 2019

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Introduction

The one constant in Students' Unions is change. And possibly cheesy chips.

Each year I undertake several democratic governance reviews for different Students' Unions across the UK. It's a part of my job that I love deeply. My own first tentative interactions with a Student Council probably weren't the best; I was busy trying to form a romantic relationship and found that debating forums may not be the most conducive places for flirting. However, I believe that SU democracy structures are vital for them as organisations.

Working at NUS I once got into trouble for suggesting that their democracy was one of the few things that made SUs unique. Meaningful forums for discussion and debate are rare indeed in wider society and as such it's important to approach these matters properly.

An inevitable question I get asked during these reviews, or I often see online, is "What are other unions doing?" Thankfully, we're a gregarious bunch in SUs and want to know what colleagues are up to. This research hopes to answer that question, whilst also explaining why it probably isn't that helpful to unions and offering guidance for what might be a different way forward.

Nick Smith

Thanks

My thanks to Tom Snape (www.linkedin.com/in/thomsnape), previously a Union Development and Democracy sabbatical officer at Keele University Students' Union, for his help collating the data used in this report.

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Why do we have democratic policy forums?

A previous colleague used to greet unusual suggestions with a colourful variation on the phrase “If that is the answer then what on earth was the question?”. It’s a good starting point for any democratic review and what different stakeholders have to say on the subject can be very revealing.

For my money, I think there’s several answers to the question “why have forums¹ for discussion and debate”.

1. To get a breadth of views
2. To resolve conflict
3. To educate students
4. To direct student leaders
5. To hold student leaders accountable
6. To be democratic

A breadth of views

Some student officers think that academic staff members are on another planet. In return, I sometimes wonder if institution staff believe officers possess some weird telepathic abilities on par with a comic book superhero when they ask things such as, “What do students think?” To be honest, the ability to contain the thoughts and feelings of tens of thousands of students seems to sit somewhere between disorientating and disgusting and I’m sure officers are pleased that they do not possess this skill.

Democratic forums, therefore, need to gain a range of student views to be valid and reflective of the different student communities and modes of study at the institution. An institution which is distance learning heavy may not be best placed to have a Wednesday afternoon physical meeting, while unions set in “academic playgrounds” a mile from a large metropolitan centre might find it easier to engage the students in their building in complex policy discussion, rather than being constricted to 280 characters on social media.

Resolving conflict

The problem with asking people what they think is that they have a tendency to tell you. And then they don’t always agree. Any forum for discussion needs to have a mechanism for making a decision about which approach is “best” and for that decision to be recorded. Underneath this is, of course, a need for mechanisms that allow a range of approaches and points to be considered – is it too impractical, too timid, too expensive, too boring to vote for?

If this is to be a forum for decision it cannot be a forum for displacement, at least not on a regular basis. Attendees at my training will know that as well as working with students, I often work with monks and in some of those organisations there can be a tendency to put off today what can be done tomorrow. Perhaps for them this is due to a belief in providence or a lifelong calling to a certain vocation, but time pressured and time limited students do not always have this luxury.

To have a resolution, you need a conflict. “Students are poor. It’s a bad thing” has been the basis of most SU campaigns for decades and rarely argued against. A forum for debate where there is no debate, no conflict, just rubber stamping may need to question its purpose.

¹ Terminology is difficult here because one Union’s assembly is another’s forum or council or big meeting. I’m simply using “forum” to mean any meeting or process by which students make decisions in a large group. I’ve also opted for “forums” rather than for a to annoy those with more of a classical education than myself.

To educate students

Several NUS Presidents ago, one of them delivered the line to a group of student officers that for Sus, democracy wasn't just an **output** but an **outcome** in and of itself.

Many organisations, such as public companies, have a process of democracy within them to choose the auditors or directors of the organisation and allocate shares. There are of course local, council and (at time of writing) European elections, too, but the public's involvement in these is to resolve a conflict about who should lead and then they step back.

Participation in democratic forums is educational in itself. The skills learnt developing arguments and considering your stance are beneficial to our members.

When I developed the NUS model governing documents, I was keen to emphasise this in the SU charitable purpose:

*“providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and **forums for discussions and debate** for the personal development of Students”*

In our unions, the fact students talk about issues is on par for sports, societies or welfare provision within the charitable objects.

To direct student leaders

While I'm sure all of the debate about this issue has not just been to make my life easier when doing democratic reviews, it's true that the public's understanding of the difference between the executive and the parliament within British politics has certainly increased since the EU referendum vote of 2016.

SU elections are essential in choosing the union's leaders, but it would be very odd to see a single vote as a monolithic statement that cannot be adapted or influenced. Democratic forums allow for student leaders to be directed on issues that have emerged since their election, as well as reflecting shifting changes to their manifesto pledges (including prioritising and removing some).

To hold student leaders accountable

Back in the halcyon days of the mid 2000s, I was a student officer expected to visit a satellite campus for at least 4 hours each week during term time. I spent 1 hour out of those 240 on the other site. I was open about it then, but managed to get away without even a raised eyebrow.

Accountability is an important part of the democratic process. While I have heard some unions react nervously to the idea, if we don't include accountability as part of the overall experience of being a leader to our officers then we are doing them a disservice. Worse, given the number who go onto high level employment later in life, we want leaders who are glad to act transparently and be measured against proper standards.

This may not happen in the same space or at the same time as policy and direction setting, but I'm nervous about democracy reviews that seem to forget this important aspect.

To be democratic

The last and by no means least important reason, we have forums for debate because we want to be democratic. The 1994 Education Act tells universities that they need to make sure that unions have elections for sabbatical positions but is otherwise silent on how a Union should be “democratic”. As I mentioned in the introduction, part of the uniqueness of

students' unions is in how they are democratically run and we do this because we **want to** rather than we must.

Along with telling student officers to take a break (and having this advice ignored), one of the points I've often made over the past 15 years is that democracy and representation are totally different things and unions should be careful not to equate the two. Increasing representation for marginalised students may, rightly, make a decision making body more representative but it doesn't necessarily make it more democratic.

The structures used by unions

The websites of 130 different unions were accessed to identify the different forums they used. In some cases it was unclear on their websites which forums for debate a union might have, or if they had them at all. Most unions (80%) used different types of forums. For reasons explained below, this research was not looking to outline the interaction between different types of democratic forum.

As mentioned in the earlier footnote, terminology is difficult, so here I have outlined for each section what each type of forum may mean in the characteristics.



Student Council

Used by: 107 Unions (81%)

Characteristics: A single congregation of students, usually elected to represent subjects (course reps), types of student (liberation groups or modes of study such as postgraduates), activities provided by the union (sports and societies), or areas of interest for students (ethical and environmental issues).

It's hardly a surprise that Student Council is the most widespread model among SUs. In some cases these sprang up to replace mass general meetings and to attempt to be more representative. There were restrictions of membership to certain groups or types of students and introducing marginalised group representatives (such as liberation group leads) onto the committee.

If a Student Council is expected to be a coming together of representatives, then they will need proper training and support to allow them to communicate to and from their "constituents", whether that be their course mates or fellow mature students.

Balances of power on Student Councils can easily shift. It's all too easy for someone to think that the answer to a problem is to "put a new position for it on Council". This can then increase the length of the meeting, the resources required to support it, and change the ratio of one sort of representative compared to another.

A small number of Unions record their Council and then hold online elections for the results, opening voting to all students while the debate is centred on the representatives.

This traditional debate model is the most common outside of Students' Unions. It may not always be the most suitable for all our members. Part of the challenge for Unions will be balancing the need to prepare our students to engage in the existing structures of society (if only to change them), while also making their union experience as accessible as possible.



Referenda

Used by: 106 Unions (80%)

Characteristics: A mechanism by which all students can be asked their view on a single issue.

The NUS model articles include a mechanism for referenda and 4 out of 5 Unions discuss these on their website. What will vary is how often individual Unions employ them. For some they are a termly mechanism to gauge student views. For others, they are used only to discuss NUS affiliation alongside elections. And for others again, they are a tool used even less regularly.

Unions should think carefully about why a referendum is the answer. If there's no conflict and the question being put has no controversy, then Unions may wonder if it needs to be asked in this manner. If a question is complicated, then steps must be taken to ensure that the electorate are properly informed about their decision and the impacts it will have.



Online “ideas” submission

Used by: 53 Unions (40%)

Characteristics: A process by which ideas can be submitted to the Union for work and “upvoted” or “down voted” by students on the website. This may then lead to the decision being discussed at another forum – e.g. it becomes a motion at Student Council or an agenda item at the executive committee.

We tend to overestimate the impact of technology in the medium term and are unable to see the emergent trends in the shorter term. In 2007 I can remember being told that all SUs would essentially be an online presence with a much smaller physical presence. While some small and specialist institutions are, partly through necessity, working in this manner, for most Unions their online work replicates previous models (elections) or supports existing ones – such as setting the agenda for Council. 2 in 5 Unions use some form of online policy process, far from the amateur futurologist's claim in 2007.

One of the reasons I think that online forums have not replaced physical ones is the need for human interaction within areas such as accountability. There are enough episodes of ‘Black Mirror’ and personal experiences of officers on Twitter to act as cautionary tales about what happens when you dehumanise an issue that needs to be approached with tact and understanding of the other's position.

Any online forum has the same broad complexities as a physical one. Firstly, how do you debate and allow for thoughts to develop in a fluid manner? How do you moderate the debate to allow discussions to take place in a challenging but not aggressive environment? Does moving discussions online make them more accessible in and of itself? The challenge of the terminology used, and the need to educate about the issues, are still all there.



Zoned Committees

Used by: 46 Unions (34%)

Characteristics: Meetings of like-minded students to give focused discussion on policy or campaign areas of the Union. The best examples may be course and faculty reps coming to discuss education policy or welfare officers from halls & liberation reps discussing wellbeing programmes or student rights campaigns.

Around a third of Unions use “zoned” discussion forums in some way. These are more focused than a Student Council and avoid the idea that the society representative doesn’t need to sit through 2 hours of education and welfare business that she is not interested in. One key factor in the overall democratic model in a Union is how these zoned committees interact with other forums. 25% of Unions have both Student Council and some form of zoned committee. In some cases, the zoned committee will make all decisions unless it is controversial. In others they will have informal discussion to refine a policy before it goes for final debate.

The other reason for having zoned committees within some Unions is about creating spaces for particular types of students to discuss and debate issues for their communities where they feel other structures are unsafe to do so. Students who define into a liberation group may not want to have their validity debated (I went to Uni to study children’s literature not to watch people chat about whether I was going to hell because I had a boyfriend). And it can be draining to have to explain the nuances of identity politics every time you have discussion. Again, how this interacts with other bodies is important to think about and communicate to your members.



General Meeting & AGMs

Used by: 37 Unions (28%)

Characteristics: A single congregation of students who come together to discuss policy issues. They have a less restrictive membership than Student Council (usually open to all students without them having to represent anyone).

28% of Unions promote general meetings and AGMs on their website as a major way of passing policy.

General meetings tend to have fewer rules and regulations than Student Councils and a more open membership (a general one in fact). The non-sector equivalents are probably meetings in companies (although there are key differences, especially for companies with shares).

A starting point for any democracy review is how you want power to be distributed. Broadly, you can have a small number of people with a high level of expertise and knowledge making decisions for others with appropriate checks and balances (representative democracy), or you can have a more direct form of engagement where a larger number of people make decisions directly but there is a greater challenge to give them the same level of expertise and knowledge (direct democracy).

Presuming students attend in proportion to your demographic it would be harder for a student with minority interests to gain rights at general meetings. However, simpler procedures mean that general meetings should be more accessible in terms of regulations.

AGMs themselves are not required (unless stipulated in the Articles) since the 2006 Companies Act but they are a useful way to meet the annual reporting requirements of the 1994 Education Act as well as providing another avenue for transparency.



Student Jury

Used by: 6 Unions (4.5%)

Characteristics: A small number of students are selected either randomly or in line with the institution's demographics to give their views on certain issues. They are not expected to be student leaders or representatives.

I'll be the first to admit that my own knowledge of student juries is limited, partly of course because their use in Students' Unions is so rare. However, some of the challenges are the same as other structures.

The jury system takes power from the generality of students and places it in the hands of a small number of students who aim to be reflective of the student body without being directly representative of it. Giving the right level of information to the jury will be very important, especially where the issues are complex or changing quickly.

A point made on the Wonkhe SU's website² is that these models need lots of time and space for the jury members to think through the issues and discuss them. This isn't impossible but requires a substantial culture change in their approach for many SUs.

I've worked with larger Unions to create democratic structures that include more deliberative, slow decision-making forums that are more akin to traditional policy development than the debate chamber. My caution as I advise them is always that this will take time to embed and a decent amount of resource to get right, but the outcomes could be very exciting indeed.

If that is the answer, what is the question?

The above has painted a picture of what Unions do by way of democratic structure and some starting points of pros and cons. Is this helpful? Why is this a question worth asking?

Let me outline three real-life universities (names are absent, but have fun guessing). They are geographically close (around 60-90 minutes drive away from each other). Each one is located about a mile from a major town or small city but have their own campuses separate from them. While the towns benefit from the universities, none of them rely on it for their main economy. Students at each of the universities are predominantly middle class and, at least compared to the majority of students at transformative universities, time rich. They are of a similar size and demographic and to all intents and purposes look very interchangeable to the majority of the general public.

In this context alone, surely it would be useful to ask each of them what their democratic model is to share good practice? Let's look closer...

- Students at *University A* have a strong halls-based community presence. While not a collegiate system, many students would describe themselves as being part of their residency as strongly as their course, and there is a "JCR" culture in the model of Oxford

² <https://wonkhe.com/blogs-sus/has-trading-off-has-ruined-citizens-juries-in-sus/>

or Cambridge. There is not a vibrant societies or sports club scene. A small number of students are very interested in particular issues, but on the whole engagement is low.

- Students at *University B* are thought of as being very political. There is an emphasis on mass movements and more radical campaigning positions. While the issues that they are interested in are multiple (ethical issues, economic and trade justice, environmental concerns, liberation rights etc.), students are nervous about anything which splits power into smaller groups.
- Students at *University C* are renowned for their engagement in clubs and societies. The largest faculties are science based and, while a campus university, the union commercial services have shrunk in favour of internet usage and entertainment in halls. Unlike University A, there is no representative structure in halls. Employability is the number one desire of students.

Even a cursory glance at these would, I hope, question the usefulness of using the structure of University A at University B or C and vice-versa. Comparison, even between very similar universities according to geography, demographic or league table, is of limited use.

Some other questions

Having suggested that the “what do other Unions do” question is less helpful than we might hope, here are my starting points that I think might aid unions.

1. **Can we see beyond our current practise?** I’m a consultant who goes into Unions and offers advice, so you might well expect me to say this, but having someone from outside your SU look at your structures is *really useful*. Unions are full of passionate, experienced staff who know their members and processes inside out which is commendable, but therefore makes reviewing them harder, not easier. Ask others for their thoughts and to share wisdom, not knowledge.
2. **What do our members want?** Governance is about people far more than procedures (or at least it should be). I love the majesty of different forums of debate interacting and the power of individuals shift as they interact (I am probably the only person to consider NUS’ democracy of 2012 as being like a constellation), but more important is what our members want their processes to be. What should they feel like? Combative, quick and final? Deliberative, slow and open? There are trade offs to be made and knowing what students want helps guide towards this.
3. **Who are they speaking to?** A Union I worked with a few years back were very keen on parity between their multiple campuses. During the review, the university closed down the other sites. Structures don’t need to mirror the university precisely, but I’m yet to meet a PVC for Education that wouldn’t want to know that their plans have been debated at Council to inform officer opinion. If you have an environmental forum then all power to you, but who will it talk to and lobby in the university or local council? How will their deliberations lead to change?
4. **Do they meet our need?** The 6 reasons for having forums that I set out on page 3 might not be the same for your Union, but I think that they are a good start. I’ve seen Unions adopt a structure that’s great for setting policy but without a mechanism to review it, or one that asks students but doesn’t educate them. What are your first principles?
5. **If this changes, what happens?** Once you’ve chosen a new model for your Union it might *then* be worth asking others who have implemented similar systems what happened next. What do they wish they knew when they first moved to a Council / Jury / Referenda system? What were the culture change difficulties and who did they need to educate?

My services to Unions

I've spent the past 15 years working in supporting leaders, volunteers and staff in charities and Higher Education Institutions unpick issues such as the ones I outline above and would be willing to talk about how I can help your Union. This could be offering expertise for an internal process or offering capacity to undertake the whole review package.

My work developing model governing documents for Students' Unions was used as an example of good practice in the House of Lords. I have a particular background in Students' Unions of all sizes and the specific challenges which they face as campaigning, representing and service delivery organisations. I have held roles as Company Secretary for NUS and NUS Charitable Services, an Assistant Registrar for Governance at a Russell Group University and Executive Officer within a leading UK Medical School.

I am board Clerk to a number of Students' Unions across the UK, as well as the policy website Wonkhe.com

My services include

- Democracy Reviews
- Governance and Trustee Board Reviews
- Training for Trustees, Trustee Chairs and Board Clerks
- Support for Incorporation
- Trustee Recruitment and Interview (see www.nowgivesomethingback.com)
- Training on engaging with University power structures and getting wins in institutional meetings
- Train the Trainer
- Compliance Support for areas including data protection, the 1994 Education Act and Codes of Practice
- Project Management training and tools

"Thank you for the thoughtfulness, consideration and thoroughness of your report - genuinely a joy to read and it is already proving to be hugely beneficial in developing our organisation's conversations... and finding ways through in this journey of reviewing and changing our structures"

SU Staff member following a governance review

I am very happy to talk about opportunities and my rates, which I aim to keep flexible for Students' Union clients.

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