Man in the Mirror

Foreword

This is one of the most simultaneously challenging and exciting reports that I have had the pleasure of introducing. Exciting because it has the potential to spark a broader debate that goes to the very core of how students' unions work, where the power lies, how decisions are made, about what, by who and why. It's challenging for precisely the same reasons.

By Raechel Mattey, Vice-President Union Development

If you go back through old students' union newspapers from the 1960s they are strangely familiar. Articles complaining that the way the students ' union makes decisions is cliquey, dominated by privileged men talking in political jargon about issues that are largely irrelevant to the wider student body. Fast forward fifty years and the same criticisms are still being made. After half a century (or more), we have to face facts; however many times we try to improve the system *as is* a majority of students remain disengaged.

It's certainly not all doom and gloom; many students' unions have just had the highest turn out in their officer elections. Some incredible work has been done to engage students thanks to the massive efforts of candidates, staff and others promoting the elections. However, students' unions are still telling me that they think things could be better; they're still not satisfied and want help from NUS to take things further.

This report examines how common structures and conceptions of leadership, equality and democracy in students' unions acts to put power in the hands of the few and keeps it there. The reason I'm so excited about this report is because of what the student movement could be like if we shared this power with all seven million students. The potential of the collective power of students to challenge the government, improve society, win campaigns and have an impact not just nationally but internationally is incredible. So I'm excited about this report because I want power to be shared, evenly among us, not just as an end in itself but because of the incredible things we could use it to achieve.

Don't get me wrong, I'm an elected officer, I won, I have power to make decisions and therefore, perhaps like you, much as I like the idea of "empowering students" tiny alarm bells start ringing when people start taking power away from elected officers and giving it to students. Of course, it is the power in em**power**ment that is the important part. So even if it makes you feel uncomfortable I'd like to invite you to feel uncomfortable with me while we explore what we might need to do to realise the exciting potential of what seven million empowered students could achieve together.

Any further important information and data to go in here. Set in Verdana 8/10 bold.

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Democracy is dead! Long live democracies

“We’re student led” is a common way that students’ unions describe what is valuable and distinct about their organisations. The primary means via which students lead their students’ union is democracy. A democratic deficit in students’ unions therefore creates an absence of student leadership and in turn, as inevitably that leadership and control is commanded from elsewhere, an absence of legitimacy. Without legitimacy, the idea that students’ unions are “the voice of students” (another common maxim) is undermined, rendering their organisations unable to fulfil their primary function and basically de facto redundant. All this considered (and indeed for a multitude of other reasons) it is pretty important that students’ unions are democratic.

One of the things about democracy is that most people in the UK believe in it but significantly less people have a particularly clear idea of what it is. Democracy as a social ideal has many practical manifestations; there are many ways of doing democracy. It has become common to automatically associate, or in some instances confuse the presence of these mechanisms, with the presence of democracy. Take voting for example, voting is not democracy but a means of achieving democracy. As the playwright Sir Tom Stoppard helpfully qualified, “It’s not voting that’s democracy it’s the counting.” However, arguably it’s not the counting either but acting on result of that count that is democracy

This lack of clarity creates a challenge, how do we know if democracy exists? How do we know when we see it or feel it? More specifically in this context, how do we evaluate democracy in students’ unions? In order to meet this challenge, the Quality Students’ Unions model developed by NUS adapted an analytical framework from the work of Professor Graeme Smith, head of the center

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for the study of democracy at Westminster University. Smith identified what he called a number of "democratic goods" that can be used to make a comparative assessment and evaluation of different democratic innovations; namely inclusiveness, popular control, considered judgement and transparency. Smith also recognises two additional institutional goods to complement the four democratic goods: efficiency and transferability. Here is a brief explanation of each good...

Inclusiveness

This is the way in which political equality is realised through two aspects of participation: "presence" and "voice". Presence is often assured through representation: literally the re-presentation of absent students when decisions are being made. So, for example Student X could attend a meeting on behalf of Student Y to make both students A and B present at the meeting. Whereas presence is concerned with who is there when decisions are being made, voice is concerned with who speaks. For example, if a meeting included an equal number of men and women but the men dominated the conversation we could recognise an equality of presence at the meeting but not an equality of voice. So ultimately an evaluation of inclusiveness is concerned with the question, do students have an equal opportunity (in presence and voice) to affect decisions?

Popular Control

This good is grounded in the literal translation of democracy or Demokratia as demos "people" kratos "power", or "the people hold power". In other words the will of students as expressed through their participation in decision-making must be acted upon otherwise their participation (however inclusive) is meaningless. Students must control not only the outcome of the decision but also how the decision is made. Smith identifies four steps in the decision-making process where students can exert power: problem definition, option analysis, option selection and implementation. Translating each of these stages into traditional students' union decision-making terms: problem definition could be done through writing a motion, option and analysis through a debate, option selection through a vote and implementation lead by elected officers. However it is rare that all students have a say in how this process is designed, or necessarily understand how to participate in each stage.

Considered Judgement

Held dear within a democracy by the likes of Fishkin and other deliberative democrats is the need to not only inform citizens of the technical aspect of the issues but also to "enlarge their thinking" through deliberation and the consideration of other students' perspectives beyond their own subjective, private conditions. This therefore requires the technical information that citizens receive to make decisions to go beyond the partisan rhetoric that typifies political dialect.

Transparency

This democratic good has two dimensions, internal transparency and external transparency. Internally the main issue is to ensure that participants are aware of the conditions under which they are participating. This includes the long-term and short-term impact of their participation, for example if a student votes in a referendum do they know a) how the issue was selected, b) when

the result will be announced c) when the decision will be implemented and d) what its implications are for their students' union. External transparency relates to the extent to which citizens can understand why decisions were made and how. This dimension of transparency has clear links to accountability as it creates a focus on the extent to which publicity enables citizens to scrutinise the actions of their institution and/or representative(s). For example, students can't hold officers to account for implementing policy or manifesto pledges unless officers publicise their progress and provide opportunities for students to challenge them.

Efficiency

The financial cost of the democratic process is a clear consideration when evaluating a system's efficiency, however just as important is the demands that it places on participant's time and energy. Indeed, it is very difficult to maintain large levels of sustained engagement from people who have other demands on their time. Bureaucracy alongside time and finance is another "input", however the true cost in holistic terms can only really be assessed when you consider the outcome, i.e. the cost of creating irrelevant policy using a cheap process is arguably higher than creating ground-breaking policy through an expensive process. It is therefore important to also consider the cost (political, financial and social) of not enabling participation in an effective process.

Transferability

For better or (normally) for worse, students' unions tend to replicate ideas they see elsewhere and apply them within their organisation. We must therefore be mindful that whatever one students' union does, may be reproduced within other organisations. It is vital therefore that both the democratic systems and the language that is used within them are simple, effective and transferable or scalable to other students' unions

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Smith's framework for evaluating and understanding democracy underpinned an exciting one-year pilot project led by VP Union Development Raechel Mattey that aimed to help students' unions to design innovative, democratic decision-making processes based on the preferences and values of their members. To inform the commission, 2839 students responded to an online quantitative questionnaire sent out by participating students' unions alongside a series of workshop with key stakeholders to define functions of democracy in their organisation. Despite including a diverse range of students' unions in the research, the responses varied very little from one institution to the next and revealed a number of consistent trends across participating students' unions:

The way decisions are made currently; most students aren't engaged, they don't feel represented or that they can hold officers to account.

Many students' unions have thousands of members. It is not always practical in large democracies such as these to have all students in the room when decisions are being made. As outlined above, representation is therefore used to practically give large numbers of students a voice and presence in the same decision. However, measuring this representation is also fraught with difficulty. Students' unions will often work hard to design representative structures, elect and train representatives to operate within them, however democratic values would dictate that students are only represented if they feel they are. In other words, only students have the right to identify if they are represented or not. The first question students were asked in the survey was therefore, "Overall, how well represented do you feel your views are when decisions are made in your students' union, your place of study, the area that you live in and the country that you live in?" The results are displayed in the table.

In summery 49.3% felt very well represented or well represented in their students' union, 51.2% in their place of study, 35.3% in the area that they live in and 38.3% in the country that they live in. There were some variations in these responses, for example students over the age of 25 felt more represented than younger students in local and national decision-making, but broadly the responses were consistent.

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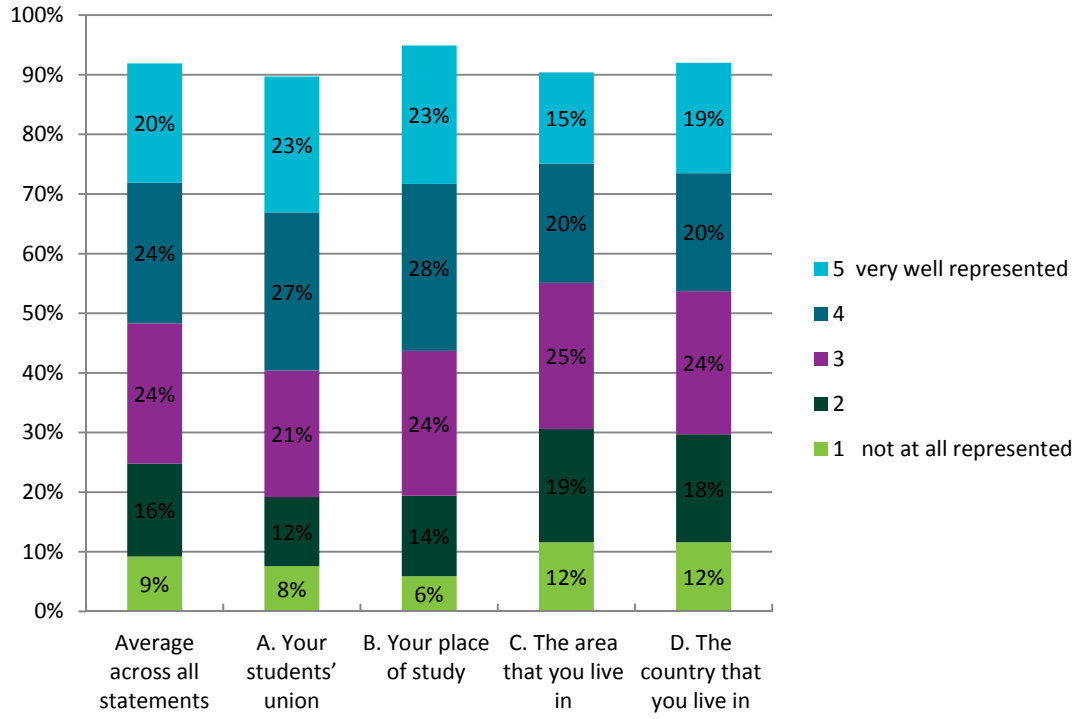

As most students' unions currently employ a form of *representative* democracy in one form or another, the extent to which they feel represented is likely to be affected by their relationship with their elected representatives and particularly the extent to which they can hold them to account. Accountability is one of the main mechanisms via which popular control is exercised in representative democracy. When asked to what extent they agreed with the statement, " I feel I can hold elected students at my students' union to account" again less than half of students responded positively. The chart below displays the breakdown of responses. A more optimistic reading of the results is that, of those students who have an opinion, the majority feels they can hold their representatives to account, suggesting the problem is more one of transparency than it is one of popular control. This may also be explained due to a lack of student engagement; indeed only 47.5% of respondents agreed with the statement, "Students are actively involved in the students' union."

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Most students don't want elected representatives to make decisions or act on their behalf without consulting them first. Nor do they feel comfortable running in an election to make decisions themselves (especially women).

Most forms of representation involve some level of consultation with those being represented. In simple terms, this consultation can occur *before* or *after* the representative acts on behalf of the students they represent. Writers commonly make a basic division between these types of representation:

Type 1. Enactive representation is where the representatives are told what to do/say by the people they represent. This would mean consulting students *before* a meeting and speaking on their behalf, literally re-presenting the views of students who are absent when a decision is being made.

Type 2. Interpretive representation is where the representatives decide what to do/say on behalf of the people they represent. This is the type of representation most commonly associated with political representation - a student gains their authority from an election to act on behalf of the students who elected them. Students are then consulted *after* the elected student has acted on their behalf and can object to what has been done in their name.

The type of representation used has implications for the broader democratic structure that these elected representatives operate within and how popular control is exerted. For example, interpretive representation relies on an effective means of students holding their elected representatives to account and recalling[1] them if necessary. Enactive representation presents a different challenge, the systems for decision making will need be more deliberative as representatives will need to work hard to understand then re-present the multiplicity of views within the students body – voting in this context becomes deeply problematic as voting is a binary expression of preference, unsuitable for re-presenting a plurality of views.

In the survey, when students were asked, "which of the following types of representation would you prefer?" they were overwhelmingly in favour of enactive representation as the chart shows.

[1] Recall is a form of direct democracy through which students can remove an elected representative from power, either through a referendum, petition or forcing an election.

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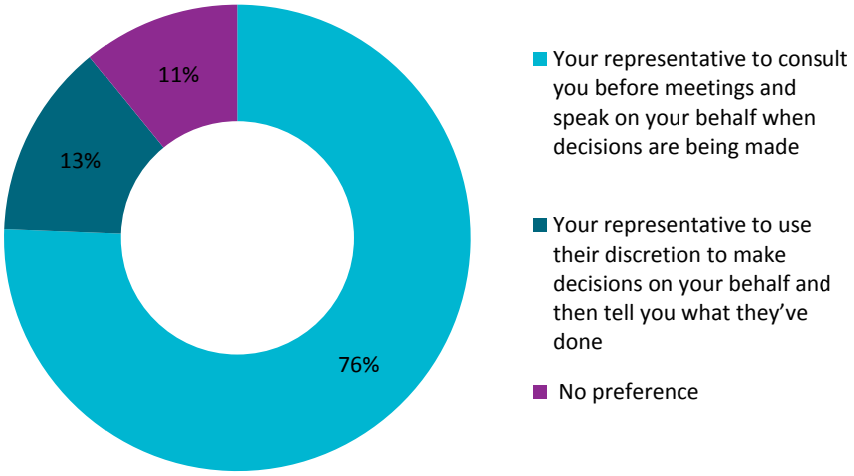
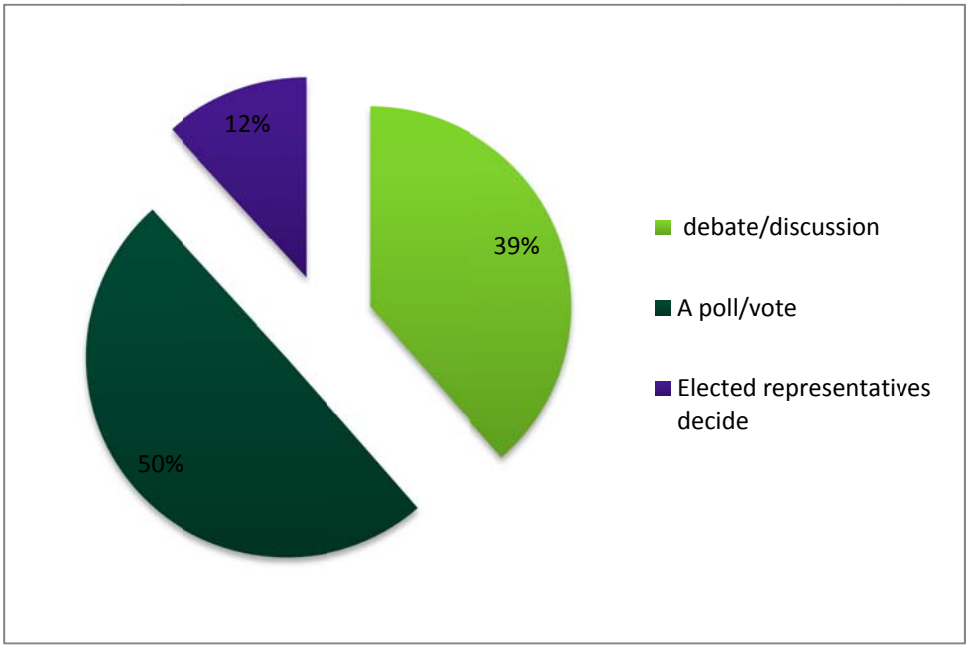


This preference for more direct control over what decisions are made was expressed through multiple other responses in the survey. For example, question 6A asked, "Which of the following, would you MOST like to see used to make decisions within your students' union? *Please select one option".* As the table below shows only 12% of respondents preferred elected representatives to make the decisions. The split between debate and voting varied slightly with some demographics, for example 47% of Lesbian/Gay students preferred debate and only 40% most want to vote, but allowing elected representatives was only marginally more popular amongst Chinese students (28%) and International students (20%).



Even when given more options and asked, "Which method(s) do you think should be used to make decisions within your union? *Tick as many as apply*", 63% of respondents did not include "elect representatives to decide on your behalf" despite being given the option to choose as many

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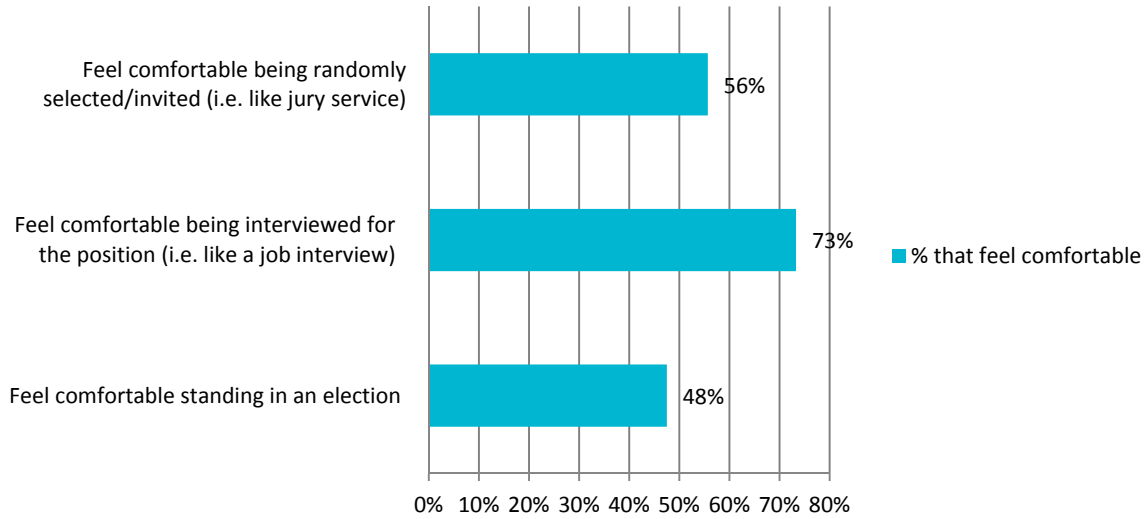
methods as they liked.

The suitability of representative democracy as the prevailing model for decision-making in students' unions is even further challenged by how uncomfortable a majority of students are in participating in its appointment process – the election. Elections are arguably the fairest way to appoint decision makers as theoretically all students have the right to stand, however it is important to consider the extent to which rules, norms and expectations can deter, exclude or undermine participation from certain students. So although elections notionally allow any student to stand, in reality only a minority of students feel comfortable running in an election. The table below shows the results to the question, "How comfortable would you feel taking part in the following processes in order to become an appointed decision maker?"



There was a particularly pronounced difference in the answers from men and women to this question. 30% of women responded to say they were "not comfortable at all" standing in an election compared to only 17% of men. Conversely 20% of men claimed to be "very comfortable" standing in an election compared to only 10% of women. However, it would be wrong to simply conclude that women are less comfortable being a decision maker, for example 59% of women were confortable being randomly selected compared to 51% of men, suggesting the variation is with the appointment process rather than the end result.

As a majority of students don't want elected representatives to make decisions on their behalf, don't feel they can hold them to account, don't want them to act without consulting them first and don't feel comfortable running in an election to do it themselves, this research calls into question the use of traditional, electoral, representative democracy in students' unions and urges us to consider democratic innovations beyond the ballot box.

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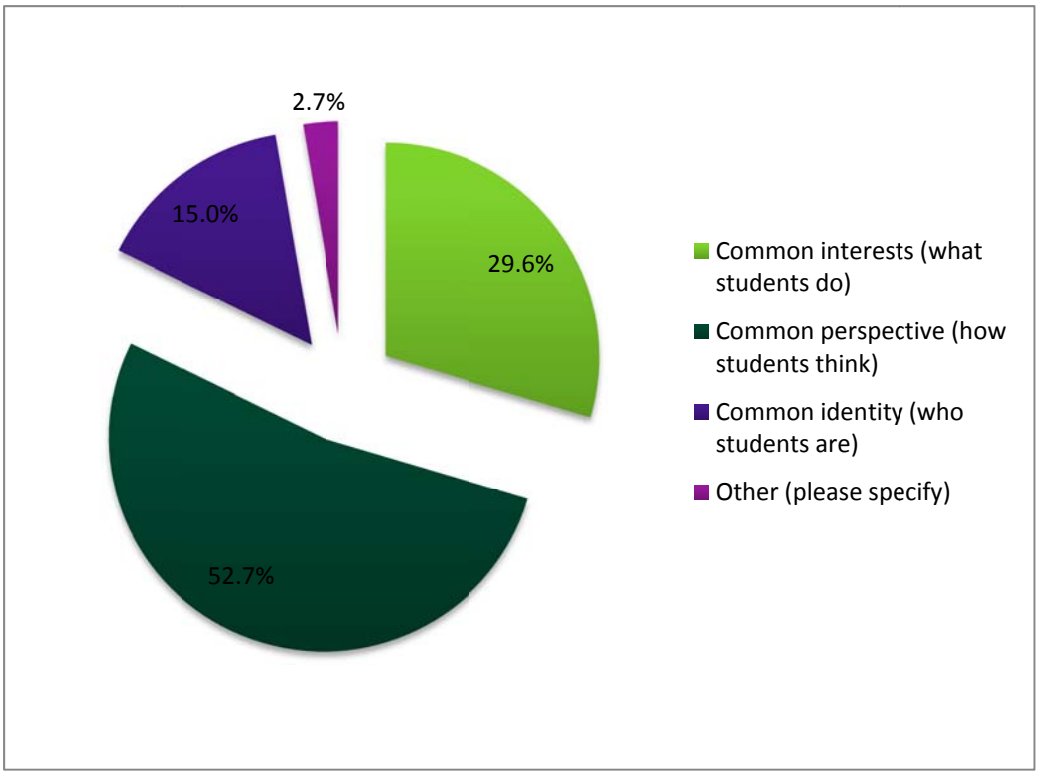
If students are to be represented, most want to be grouped according to common perspective and interests such as what they study. However, when who they are means they are likely to experience oppression, then this creates an affinity between students. E.G. Lesbian/Gay students share each other's views, as do those of a similar socioeconomic class.

The idea of the assembly is a long-standing facet of the democratic tradition. In order to either represent students or bring them together to debate and decide on the issue themselves, it is often necessary to group students together around something relevant they think they have in common. The important question is, who gets to define what things are relevant and what are not? Clearly, democratic values dictate that students should define the way in which they are grouped together - allowing them to "formulate their problems themselves, and determine the particular conditions under which they can receive a more general solution" (Deluze and Guattari). To begin to try and understand the preference for this, students were asked the following, "If a group is "'a collective of individuals who are connected with each other in ways that are relevant to them", how do you think students should be grouped to be represented when decisions are being made? The responses to this question are summarised in the table below:



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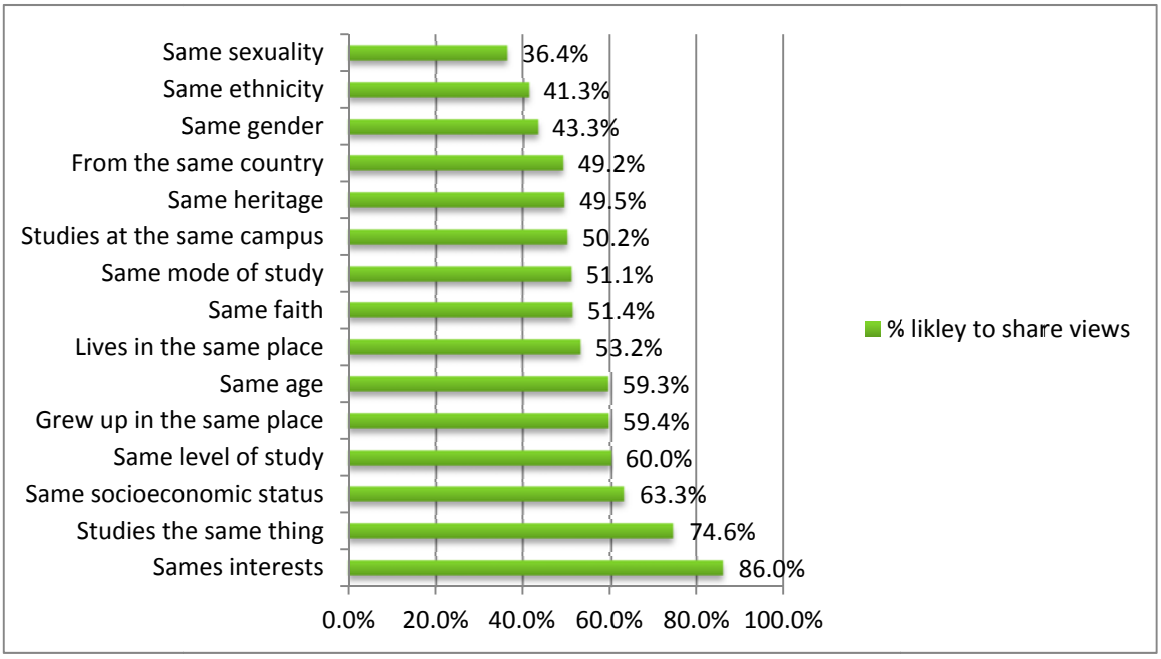
Overwhelmingly students prefer to be grouped according to common interest and perspective rather than common identity. However, lesbian/gay and disabled students had slightly higher desire to be grouped according to common identity (22% and 20% respectively). This is consistent with what Jane Mansbridge's found in her research, that people who experience discrimination find it easier to forge bonds of trust with people who share their experience of systemic disadvantage. As were the answers to a further question when students were asked, "Please read the list of factors below. From your own experience, how likely, if at all, would you say you are to share the same views as someone who appears to share the following characteristics with you".



On first impressions the table above may not entirely support the idea of liberation campaigns and associated groupings until you consider the following:

- 47% of women believe they are likely to share the views someone with the same gender, compared to 37% of men
- 75% of lesbian/gay and 49% of bisexual students believe they are likely to share the views of someone with the same sexuality, compared to 34% of heterosexual students
- 55% of Asian students and 62% of Black students believe they are likely to share the views of someone with the same ethnicity, compared to 36.4% of white students
- 68% of international students believe they are likely to share the views of someone from the same country compared to 46% of home students.

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The reading of this table, which in fact strongly supports the need for liberation groupings, illustrates the danger of majority rule as minority interests can be ignored, or swamped in the wishes of the majority. The trend it reveals is illuminated by Brito-Vieira and Runciman (2008) who write that, “characteristics are often used to assign positions of worth in society in ways that affect the groups members’ statues, and life chances with reference to the members of other groups; generating structural relations of power and inequalities that are clearly correlated with categories of identity, these power relations work themselves upon the life histories of the group members and are likely to give rise to certain common experiences (sexual, racial, economic discrimination etc.) as well as generating shared views of social reality”. In this instance, perhaps it is reasonable to believe that Women, Lesbian/Gay, Bisexual, Asian, Black and other students who experience structural oppression will have a shared perspective or view of social reality as Brito-Viera and Runciman call it. However, these writers also warn “that essentialist conceptions of identity (say Women-ness) as automatically determining the group members’ entire, holistic experiences, views and behaviour in respect to all issues are dangerously misleading in that they result in a denial of the instability and internal hetrogeniality of identity categories and nature of discrimination”. For example, as well as saying they are likely to share the views of someone with the same sexuality, lesbian/gay students also responded in the survey that they’d be likely to share the views of someone with the same socio-economic status as them. Intersectional understandings of discrimination are therefore key, as although they would both be highly likely to experience homophobia, an upper class lesbian may have a different holistic life experience to a working class lesbian.

Most students want to use voting and debate to identify problems and decide solutions. However, the obvious associated democratic methods such as referendum and open general meetings are adversarial in nature and based on majority rule. In contrast, most students believe democracy should be inclusive, mutually agreeable and aim to establish equality in the student body.

As already illustrated, as they have little appetite to allow representatives to make decisions on their behalf, students are generally more in favour of direct and deliberative rather than representative democracy. The next table is consistent with this observation, charting students’ responses to the question, “Which method(s) do you think should be used to make decisions within your union?”

Campus wide ballots where everyone gets a vote is over 10% more popular than the next cluster of preference around big meetings open to all students and online forums, before the third cluster of methods with circa 40% approval. Cross campus ballots are a form of direct democracy, high on what Smith called popular control and relatively inclusive as everyone gets a vote - however, in the absence of debate, less considered judgment occurs and, due to an inconsistent understanding of the process, transparency can vary. Big open meetings allow for more considered judgement following debate (though most of it rhetorical) and are theoretically inclusive, though equality of

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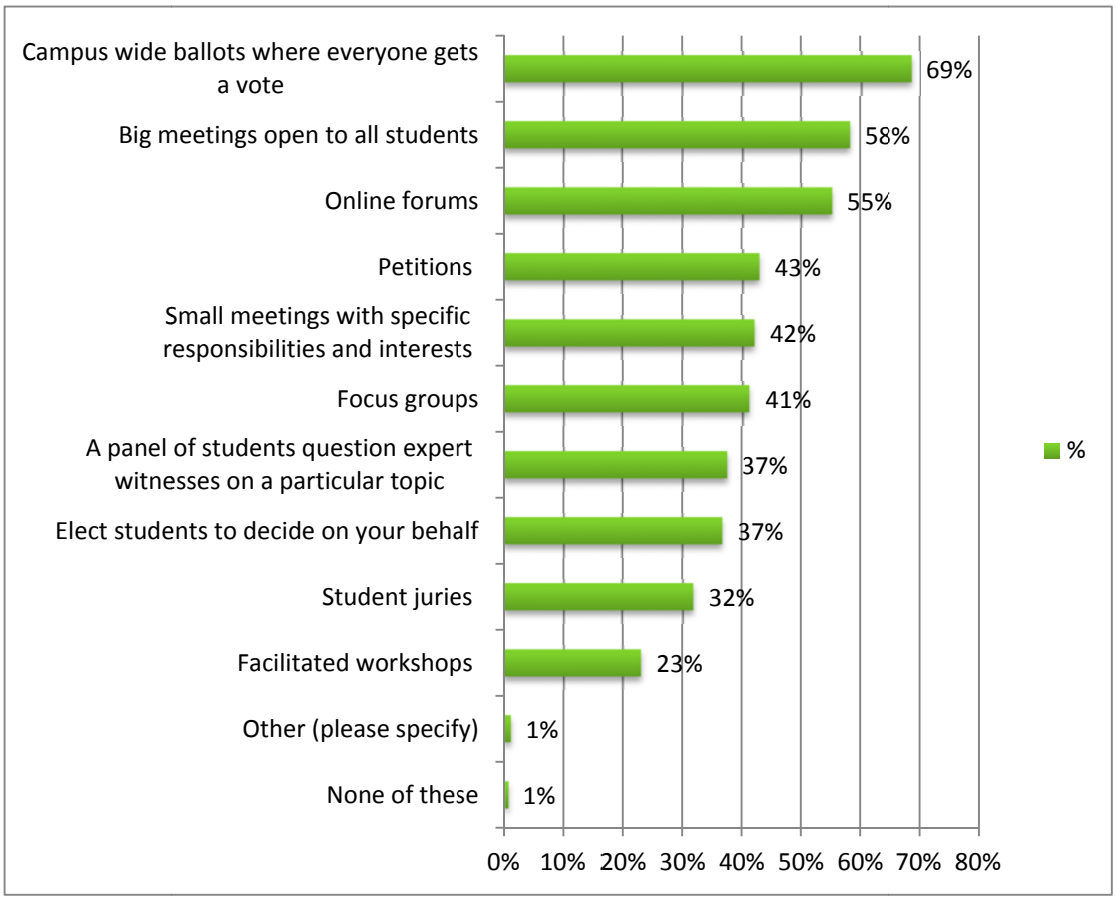
voice and presence is likely to vary wildly with gender, class, age and experience of the process. As another form of direct democracy, big open meetings are high on popular control (even if only by certain parts of the populace) and transparent only if accessible language is used and the process is not too bureaucratic.



Possibly the greatest challenge that this research raised is how to balance students' preferences for what could be described as *democratic method* with *democratic outcome*. In other words, how to marry students' preference for using direct democratic method which traditionally operates on a majority rule basis with the preferences outlined in the next set of tables for mutually agreeable decisions, based more on consensus where the union is controlled by all its members not simply a majority of them.

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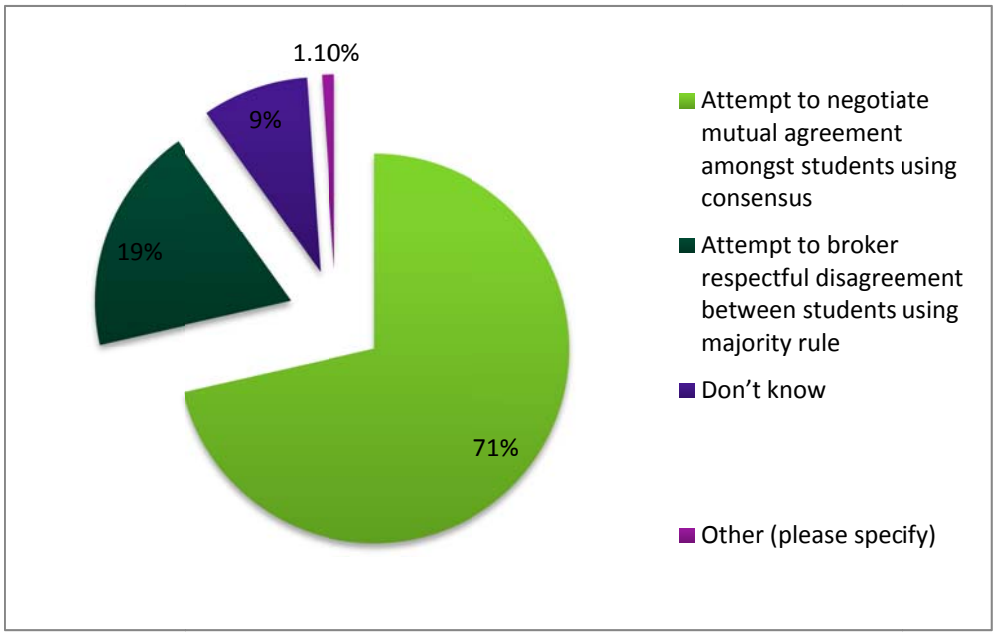

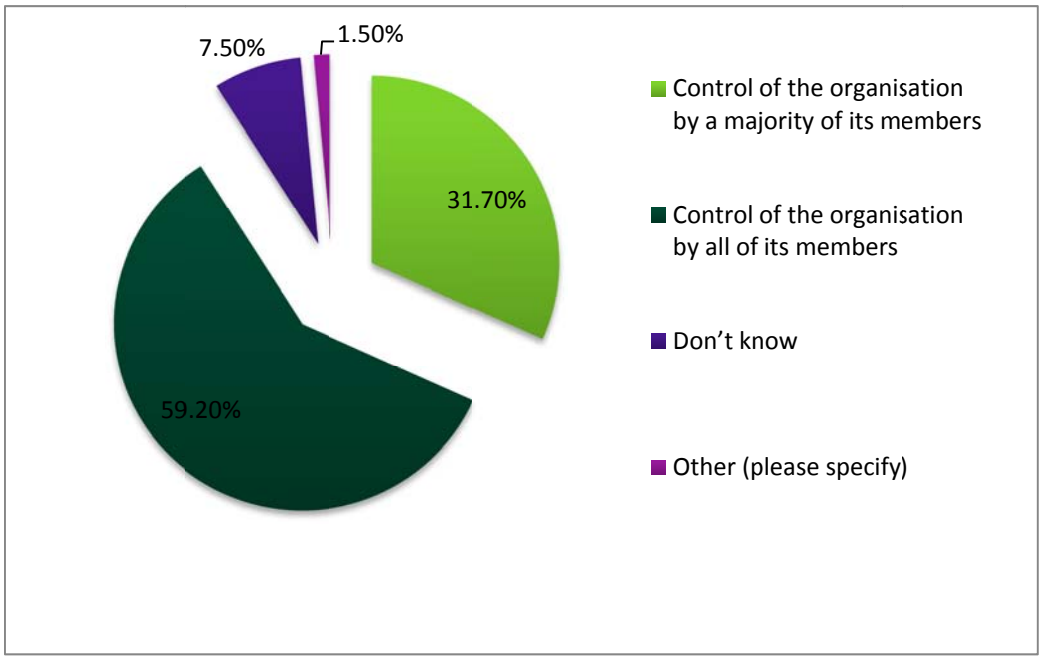

Both tables above show responses to two questions around what democracy should do and be in a students' union. These are deeply value-laden questions that varied slightly between men and women. For example, 76% of women were in favour of consensus compared to 67% of men.

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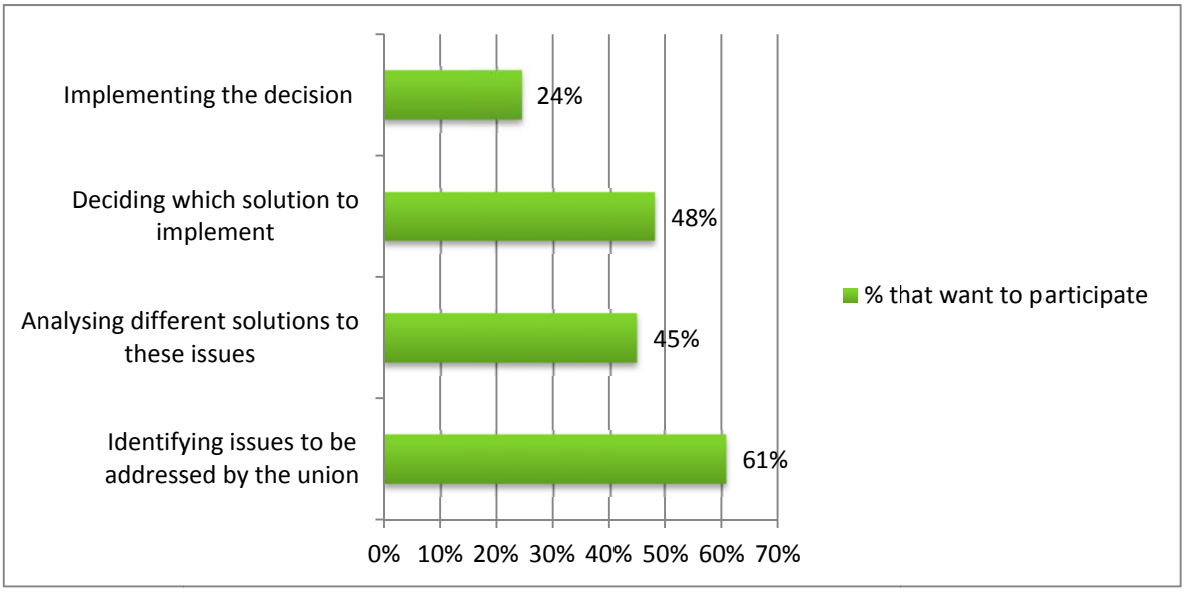
Conversely, 37% of men believe that the union should be controlled by a majority of its members compared to only 29% of women. Overall, women are likely to value inclusivity and unitary decision making more than men. Nevertheless, regardless of gender, this combination of method and values furthers the need for us to experiment with the creation of new democratic innovations that do not allow a majority to consistently overrule a minority, whilst giving all students the opportunity to have a direct say when a decision is made.

Students also expressed an encouraging appetite to participate in different stages of the decision-making. With this information it becomes easier to begin to consider which method you might employ at each stage of the decision making process. For example, identifying issues to be addressed could be done on online forums, different solutions to these problems could be debated at an open meeting and the decision around which solution to implement via cross campus ballot. This would leave elected representatives to work with the minority of students interested to implement the decision.



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For most students, it's important that the students' union influences the institution. However, most students also have a greater appetite than perhaps most students' unions currently provide to influence the way their union spends money and affect national government policy. Students also showed a consistent concern for the environment.

The vast majority of this research has concentrated on how decisions are made rather than what the decisions are about. The final question in the survey provided students with a list of issues and asked them to what extent they agreed with the statement, the results are displayed in the table below. Students' unions might consider the extent to which they provide their members with the space and opportunity to debate and influence issues raised as consistently important. For example, very few students' unions allow their students to exert direct control over budgetary decisions, nor other important decisions such as the recruitment of senior staff. Such decisions are currently reserved for elected officers. The table also indicates an appetite to influence national government and in particular education policy, a job normally reserved primarily for NUS and its officers.

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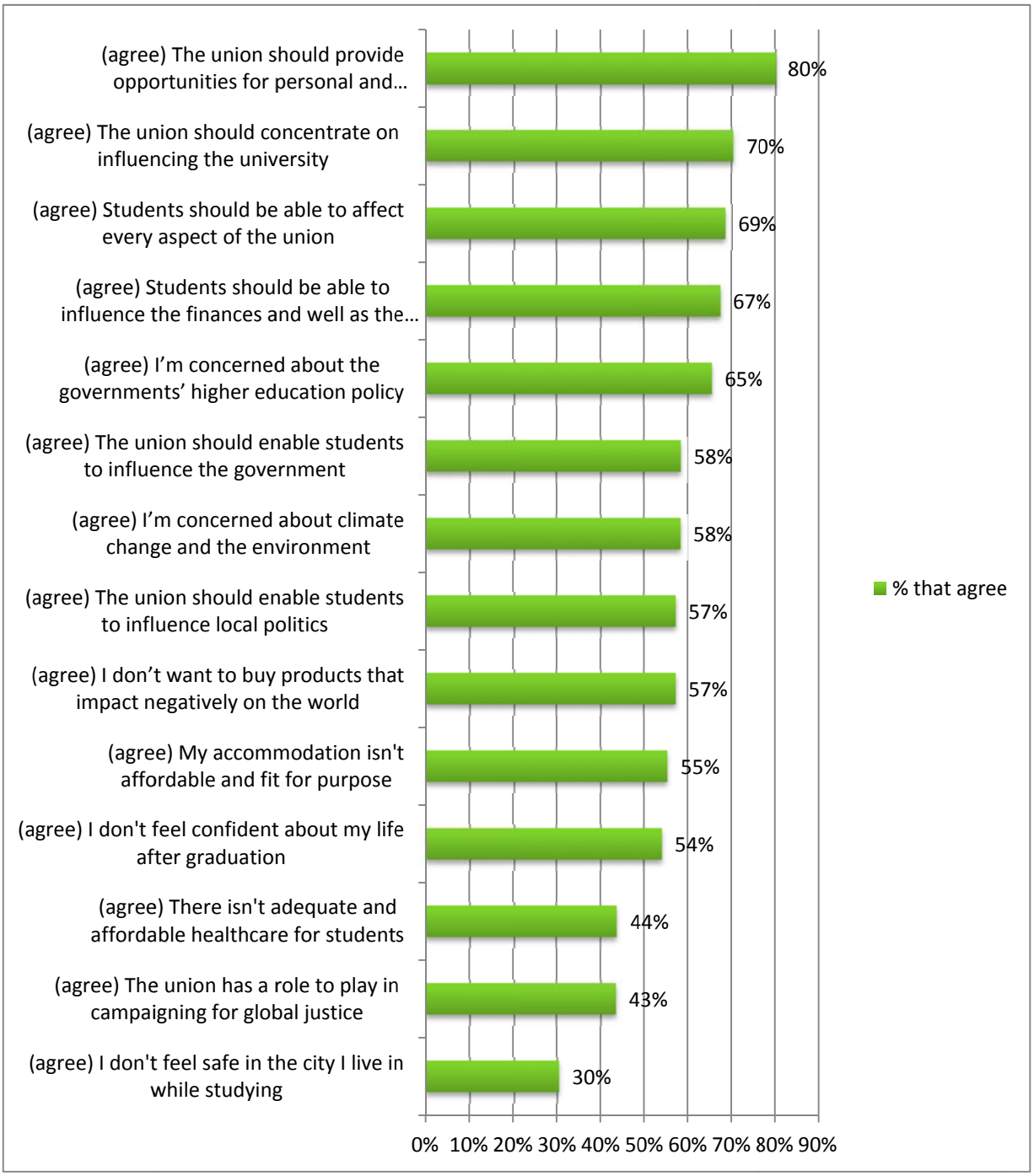

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Democratic Innovation in Students' Unions

The research removes our attention from focusing on the importance of officers and refocuses our consideration on the power of student communities. The following innovations are being considered by students' unions in order to respond to the findings of the research.

Preferendum: also known as multi-choice ballot, Preferendum combines the process of numbering options from the STV electoral process with a referendum. So rather than simply presenting students with a single solution to a problem they've identified, preferendum offers a number of different solutions which students can number in order of preference as they do with candidates in a STV election. A preferendum therefore generates the most preferred option amongst those who vote (which can include "no to all the solutions offered"). Preferendum goes some way of combining students' desire to make decisions using cross campus ballot with their desire to make more mutually agreeable decisions. This makes the ballot more inclusive than a simple referendum, whilst still strong on popular control; it also increases the potential for considered judgement, as it is not a simple yes or no question.

Direct initiatives with quorum: also potentially applicable to elections, this method allows students to submit ideas online to be decided on via cross campus ballot. However, as the tendency to vote varies with various factors such as class, age and gender[2] this process could be made more unitary and inclusive by introducing quotas for underrepresented groups and/or increasing the majority required to pass an idea. So for example, just as students' unions often insist on a minimum number of students for a vote or meeting to be valid, it is possible to introduce a quorum for the percentage of say women, working class and/or black students. Another option is to increase the percentage of students who vote yes or no from fifty to say seventy percent, meaning more students have to agree one way or another for the decision to be made.
Introducing more quorums is another way of making voting more inclusive as it structurally assures minimum participation from different students. Popular control is maintained as with preferendum though the potential for deliberation and considered judgement is less. NUS has received assurance that introducing a quorum for underrepresented groups in cross campus ballots is legal (see appendix 1).

Online forum and petition: electronic democracy is often considered more accessible as students can participate remotely. Where there are a large number of students willing to participate like in the identification of problems the use of online forums becomes a highly valuable method. Students can post problems and sign petitions to force a debate and/or ballot on an issue (8% is a common requirement of support elsewhere). Petition could also be used to hold officers to account by removing them or forcing a ballot on their office (commonly 25% of citizens who voted in the election)

Online forums are inclusive, as not all students have to participate at the same time and space although they don't guarantee the diversity of quorums. As more information can be placed online the potential to help students understand the conditions of their participation is also high. Petitions, like referendum and open meetings, are a form of direct democracy that enables popular control – however this process would only be used to spark debate/a vote rather than make final decisions. By reading other students opinions and technical information provided by the union on the issue, the potential for considered judgment is also high.

[2] See appendix 1 on voter turn out, class, gender and ethnicity

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Citizen Assembly by sortition: possibly the most exciting innovation to be considered by a students' union, this method institutionalises direct democracy. Rather than running in election to become decision makers, every student has an equal chance of being one of (e.g. 100) students selected to be part of what is essentially like a demographically representative student house of lords. Good if student engagement is low, once students have raised issues they are concerned about (say via online petition), officers could propose solutions that are then debated by this student assembly who can either consensually approve the proposal or send it back to the officers for further considerations with their concerns. The membership of the assembly could rotate annually or termly.

This innovation is highly inclusive as the membership of the assembly is designed to reflect the characteristics of the student body. However, the public control is limited to the 100 students who are selected. Having fewer students involved allows the quality of the deliberation and related decision making to increase. Participants can be trained, well facilitated (again increasing inclusivity) and enabled to consider both technical information and the views of others. This form of innovation is therefore very high in terms of transparency and considered judgement.

Participatory budgeting**:** participatory budgeting (PB) has been used all over the world, from Porta Alegre in Brazil to Durham in northern England, to enable people to make decisions about how money is spent where they live and work. This method would enable students to mutually agree investment priorities (e.g. for the union and/or university/college) at open meetings within their localities (e.g. school or type of club/society) and select a representative to sit on broader decision making bodies who then negotiates with other representatives and presents a student budget to the officers/trustee board/university/college council.
PB enables popular control over decisions normally reserved for boardrooms. As it gives students information about the budget of their institution and/or students' union and debate ideas with others, it helps students to make considered judgements. The transparency of the process relies on the training and facilitation, before, during and after the process. The inclusivity is also subject to the way the process is administered.

Combining Democratic Innovations

As outlined above, each of these innovations are good in different ways. No one single innovation alone is likely to satisfy the needs and preferences of students for how decisions are made, but by combining them, they can come close. For example, a student assembly selected by sortation is strong on transparency, inclusiveness and considered judgement, so if, for example, online petition is introduced to allow students to challenge the decision of the assembly then more popular control can be introduced into the system

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Conclusion

One of the wonderful things about democracy being an idea or rather an ideal rather than an event or administrative process is that students' unions are unlikely to ever be totally democratic. The advantage of democracy and representation being unclear in terms of meaning is that we (the people) can interpret this idea(l) within our locality, within our terrior. What Smith's model does is give us a framework to play with, a starting point to begin to ask some interesting questions and interrogate what we have now, as we have we have begun to do in this research. What is even more useful is when the answers to these questions, as in this case, don't support the status quo and we have to think, critically about why we're doing what we're doing and how it can be improved. After all, coming to terms with the reality that we have to revolutionise the way we structure our decision making because it is out of sync with the values and preferences of our members is far more reassuring a reality for anyone with genuinely democratic aspirations than the idea that, after a rich history of political engagement, acting at the heart of the public consciousness, students have simply become apathetic, individualists, seeking only to become more cost effective citizens in an society with an ever expanding democratic deficit. But let us be clear, if we fail to make this change, if we are unable or unwilling to imagine something better; then our existing adversarial, competitive and ultimately masculine forms of democracy will continue to serve and reproduce the political class, the minority of students, the man in the mirror.

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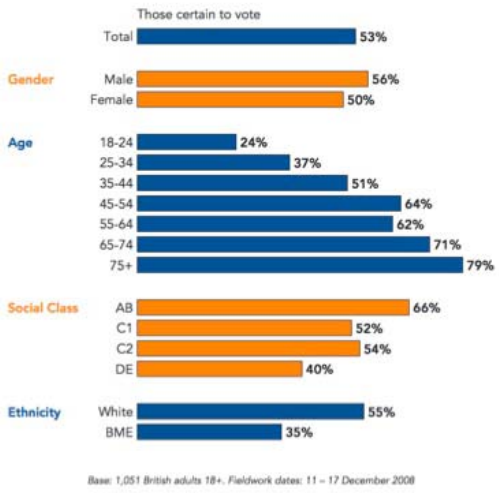
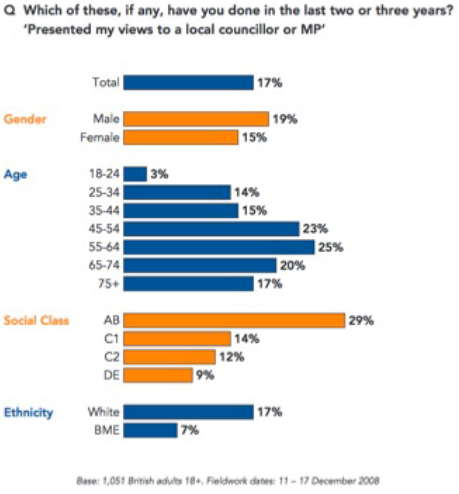
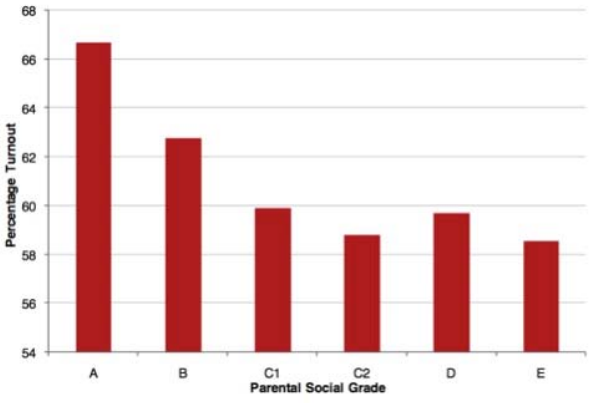
Appendix

"Social class has more of an impact on political engagement levels than any other factor. On every single measure in this year's Audit, people classified as social grades AB are more politically engaged than DEs, frequently by a margin of around 15 to 20 percentage points. Correspondingly, university graduates are significantly more engaged than those with fewer or no qualifications, and readers of quality newspapers more so than readers of the popular press. All three factors are strongly inter-correlated" - Hansard Society Annual Audit of Political Engagement





The two tables above are taken from the 2008 annual audit of Political Engagement, clearly illustrating how levels of engagement vary with gender, age, class and ethnicity. A comprehensive analysis of the political views of the student population over a four-year period by Professor Paul Whiteley (University of Essex) identified as similar trend. The table below shows percentage of students who voted in the last general election from different socio-economic groups.



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national union of **students**

The law firm BWB have provided the following advice regarding quorums:

The Equality Act does allow membership organisations to take positive action if the following two conditions are met:

Participation in an activity by persons who share a protected characteristic (e.g. sex) is disproportionately low – e.g., if women's participation at Company Law Meetings is disproportionately low compared to men's participation; and

The action is a proportionate means of achieving the aim of enabling or encouraging persons who share the characteristic to participate in that activity – i.e. if introducing the 50% quorum is a proportionate means of enabling or encouraging women to participate in Company Law Meetings.

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Women's Representation: A Catch-22 of the Student Movement

***"A catch-22 is a paradoxical situation from which an individual cannot escape because of contradictory rule. Catch-22s often result from rules, regulations, or procedures that an individual is subject to but has no control over. One connotation of the term is that the creators of the 'Catch-22' have created arbitrary rules in order to justify and conceal their own abuse of power."* (Wikipedia, 2014)**

As with virtually any organisation or institution, democratic or otherwise; students' unions, NUS and the student movement as a whole remain in a leadership diversity deficit that has existed since records began. This is perhaps not surprising given that the majority of decision makers with the power to create accessible structures do not identify as women, which has often meant that changes such as this are less likely to be prioritised; particularly when it may involve politically controversial steps to ensure equality of outcome. As Williams (2010) observes- *"If we continue to rely on vague good intentions, meaningful change will take generations."* Unfortunately for women's leadership, the majority of opinion on what should be done to create change languishes in the outdated model of 'equality of opportunities', which is at best a passive approach to reducing overt discrimination, at worst an ineffective and damaging rhetoric that should be seen as the base line requirement, not a progressive solution.

However surprising (or not) women's underrepresentation in leadership may be, this chapter seeks to understand some of the less explored (and more damaging) barriers to participation within the student movement, alongside reassessing our concepts of equality, outlining the Catch-22 dilemma women face in engaging with students' unions and NUS, and providing a logical discourse on the steps to improving women's representation within the movement. Although this chapter will largely focus on women's representation, it should also be clear that the theories outlined will have many relevancies for underrepresented groups as a whole.

nus
national union of students

The current picture of women's representation

Female[3] students comprise 56.4% of HE students, 55.3% of postgraduates, 64% of undergraduates and approximately 43% of FE students.

45% of students' union officers are women, 38% of presidents are women (NUS Officer Diversity Survey, 2012)

At NUS National Conference, the largest single decision making body in the student movement, women are underrepresented proportionally and have been for virtually the entire history of the organisation (NUS diversity monitoring forms)

- 2007: 37% women
- 2010: 38% women
- 2011: 38% women
- 2012: 40% women
- 2013: 40% women

At this rate of increase, utilising the current 'incremental-track' model instead of a 'fast-track' policy measure (Dahlerup, 2012) it will take around **15 and a half years** for the percentage of women represented at National conference to reflect the current proportion of **HE women students** and nearly **three years** to reflect the current proportion of **FE women students**. It will take **14 and a half years** for it to reflect the current proportions of **Postgraduate women**, and nearly **23 years** to reflect the number of **Undergraduates**. Even if we were to '**average out**' the approximate number of female students as a whole between **HE and FE (49.7%)**, given our current trajectory it would still take over **nine years** for conference delegations to reflect this; as we know there is a wider issue in the engagement of FE Unions at national conference which means that the makeup of the event is **almost exclusively HE** and therefore it would not be an accurate reflection of the proportions of women even if this percentage (**49.7%**) were to be reached.

Students' unions themselves are not hugely different in this area. Although there are some with all women sabbatical teams, this is almost never a recurring event, and is commonly preceded or followed by majority men sabbatical teams for many years. Even at unions where the sabbatical team may have a 'high' proportion of women officers (more than 50%) it is almost exclusively the case that the president or equivalent officer identifies as a man. From evidence submitted by a number of unions in the movement, there appears to be no link between the funding/status/mission group of unions or their proportions of women members, and their likelihood to elect a proportionally representative sabbatical team.

We know from previous NUS diversity research that when women (or most other underrepresented groups) stand for election that they are in fact proportionately slightly more likely to be elected than their 'counterparts'. Of course, this is an average and as such may not reflect the exact situation at every students' union, however NUS participation research has also shown that women are distinctly more likely to be involved in volunteering, being a course rep, voting, participating in clubs and societies and campaigning than their peers.

[3] NUS takes data on gender identity rather than biological sex, therefore data on students recorded as 'female' by sex may not accurately reflect the numbers of students that identify as women by gender identity, we may actually expect that the numbers of students who identify as women to be larger than the current data on female students

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Given women's clear willingness to engage in the 'grass roots' levels of students' unions, and their ability to win elections- we must ask ourselves, what is it that is blocking the pipeline of women students from taking part in elections, and therefore from becoming leaders of our students' unions, NUS and by extension, wider political life?

What's stopping women?

Notwithstanding theories specific to governments, party politics and wider gender inequality which women face in their lives; academics in gender and politics suggest there are three areas of consideration that are relevant to the student movement when discussing the barriers women face in participating in democracy: capacity, structure and organisational culture.

Capacity: the skills and/or confidence a person has to take part in a process to become an elected representative. Do they see themselves as a leader? Do they feel as though they could win against other candidates?

Structure: The form a representative structure takes, including both 'solid' outlined systems such as course reps, union council, sabbatical officers etc, and more nuanced 'soft' processes which are required to take part in those systems, for example hustings, election timings and budgets. Essentially, the political architecture of the organisation or movement.

Organisational culture: The messages, opinions and actions of an organisation and how that represents the organisation to the outside world, and therefore to women. This might include messages related to expected gender roles of women, and what a leader 'looks like' (see chapter 1 of this report) As specific examples for the student movement: 'Lad Culture', and an organisation's complicity in its existence creates barriers for women in engaging with both democracy and education (and therefore leadership). Conversely, a publicised investment in women's engagement in elections, including via opening debates on quotas and by running women in leadership events, can at least reduce barriers of perception.

The majority of rhetoric and action around increasing women's leadership has focussed (perhaps unsurprisingly) on the need to 'educate' or 'build confidence' of women in order for them to be 'empowered' to succeed in political office, alongside implementing policies such as 'zero tolerance to sexual harassment'. Indeed, NUS has itself created 'I Will Lead the Way' which seeks to support women in their journey to be elected, as well as facilitating them to become effective change-makers and role models for the next generation of women leaders. Structural changes to the architecture of democracy and creating a culture change within an entire organisation to address underrepresented group's participation are not easy things to do, particularly not in an environment which is distinctly lacking in the leadership, representation and engagement of the majority of its members- women.

Phillips (2004) states that it is *"usually easier to tackle overt discrimination than to engage with structural differences that run through the entire organisation of social life"*, and in fact capacity development initiatives have often been the 'go-to' solution for any organisation seeking to increase the number of women leaders it has.

However, unfortunately relying on capacity development alone has a number of inherent flaws. Firstly, it accuses women of producing the barriers that exclude them, essentially blaming women

for their inability or even unwillingness to engage in the established political system; a system which has been designed in the majority by men and been in place since long before women even had the right to vote. Secondly, from the distinct lack of increase in the numbers of women in organisations where this has been a sole focus, it's plain to see that it simply does not work.

As an example from government politics: both the conservatives and liberal democrats have historically stuck to 'equality of opportunity'-style initiatives such as mentoring and training, whilst the labour party has implemented more structured 'equality of outcome' changes including quotas alongside using capacity development (training and mentoring). It is no coincidence that immediately following the implementation of quotas, labour's women MPs were significantly higher in number than that of both the conservative and liberal democrat parties, or even that since the redaction of the majority of quota initiatives including all-women shortlists by labour, that the number of women elected to become MPs has decreased despite a continued investment and effort to train and support women personally in their 'skills and confidence'.

***"Failing some weird stretch of DNA that attaches [gender] and race to the capacity to make speeches or deliberate on public affairs, the only explanation for under-representation is that something is blocking the way"* (Phillips, 2004)**

Equality of opportunity vs equality of outcome

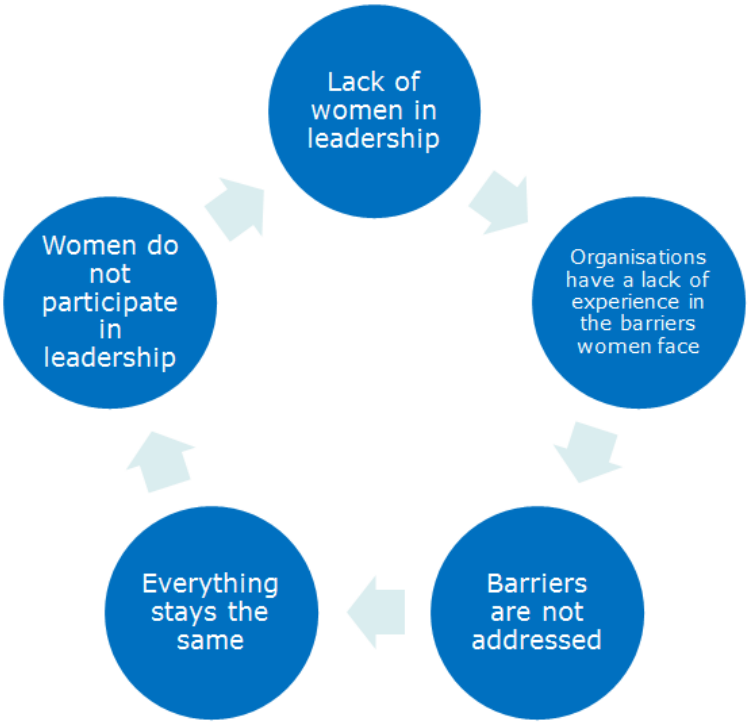
It is important given the purpose of the core function of representation within the student movement, to make the distinction between equality of opportunity and equality of outcome, since the two are often used interchangeably. But there is a substantial difference between these two concepts, and indeed, there is a further approach to consider as a concept of equality. Rees (2002) suggests that equal treatment (or equality of opportunity) is a legal redress to treat everyone the same, whereas positive action recognises that there are differences between genders and that measures are required to address disadvantages experienced by women as a result of those differences. Further to this, gender mainstreaming, 'ideally should involve identifying how existing systems and structures cause indirect discrimination and altering or redesigning them as appropriate' (Phillips, 2004)

Perhaps it is unsurprising that the majority of work by unions and NUS towards increasing women's representation and leadership has almost exclusively focussed on a theme of 'equal opportunities' or 'equal treatment', as this is the overarching narrative on equality in the UK today. As Howard and Tibballs (2003) state: ***"It is equal treatment rather than positive action that is increasingly espoused as the normative ideal of equality amongst the general public in contemporary Britain. Equal opportunities, flexibility and modernization have become central norms. Recent research commissioned by the EOC indicates that the British public is sceptical about the idea of equal outcomes and is more comfortable with the idea of equal opportunities. They use the language of 'fairness', 'tolerance' and 'having the same chances in life'."***

Indeed, the majority of students' unions participating in the 'Diversifying the Movement' project which aimed to establish and test methods for increasing the diversity of leadership in officer positions, chose to focus primarily on capacity development or equality of opportunity initiatives, often despite an initial display of willingness to undertake more radical or progressive change in structure or behaviours that would be seen as equality of outcome or gender mainstreaming. Commonly this return to the political safety of training and developing women candidates, or

treating all candidates equally rather than more controversial systems which treat candidates differently in order for them to achieve the same outcomes (including quotas) was brought about through a resistance from the established power structures, including via strong rejection from union council or the sabbatical leadership of the union itself.

Although of course the elected representatives of the union have the right to make these decisions, one might question the justification or unconscious motivations behind denying change in this way, particularly as it would likely reduce the current leadership's ability to recreate the systems which they benefitted from. Given the national narrative on understandings of equality, a lack of test cases for major cultural and structural change within students' unions, and a significant challenge in communicating the arguments for favouring equality of outcome it may be unfair to expect that the majority of the student movement would either willingly embrace or actively promote things such as targeting potential women candidates or implementing quotas. Whether rightly or wrongly, this reticence from all corners of the student movement to move beyond 'equal treatment' to 'equality of outcome' and even 'gender mainstreaming', has created a Catch-22 for women's representation.



Tellingly, despite a consistent commitment to equality from the political leadership of NUS (which has included training and confidence building of women election candidates of students' unions for many years, alongside numerous equality of opportunity initiatives and some quota work in the form of reserved places), it has taken a majority women full time officer team, and woman president to push women in leadership from simply being a focus of the women's campaign, to becoming a national priority for the organisation and therefore receiving access to much needed resources. The very culture of the organisation, the activities it has undertaken and the narrative it has created since, has fundamentally been re-directed towards creating equal outcomes for women's leadership, all as a result of the influence of a majority women full time officer team. It would be particularly challenging for any single person to create the kind of dramatic change required for a sustained and meaningful increase in the number of women in leadership positions,

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and this challenge is amplified further still when it is almost exclusively the case that this cause will be solely led by women, of whom there are commonly very few in positions of power.

This is by no means the only example of the 'mandate effect', whereby women elected to positions of power often feel responsible to act on behalf of women; this happens throughout the world, and interestingly even more often when women are elected within a system that employs quotas. As Franceschet and Piscopo (2012) observed in their research on the impact of gender quotas *"…our findings provide some empirical support for the expectation that female legislators…might be more inclined to act for women"*. Women elected through quotas report feeling obligated to act for women as a group (Schwartz 2004, Skjeie 1991) and are inspired to bring new issues to the table (Kudva 2003, Thomas 2004).

Despite some instances of women reaching positions of power and 'pulling up the ladder behind them', in NUS' recent case at least (and that of many students' unions) the women who have reached power (and their allies) have chosen to act on behalf of women, in creating rules, regulations and procedures that support the growth of women's leadership. Examples include recent work in students' unions (often with women presidents, or majority women sabbatical teams) which include reserved places for women on union councils, local women in leadership events and explicit targeting of potential women candidates. Since the start of the new officer year in July 2013, the student movement has seen a dramatic increase in the number of policies, events and initiatives in support of women's leadership, almost exclusively created by women leaders. These examples are not simply confined to the 'usual suspects' either, in fact they are commonly coming from unions that have historically had a strong primary focus on sporting culture, or simply a lack of high profile engagement with liberation campaigns.

It's fair to say that any majority women officer team is almost certainly an anomaly, and as such is virtually impossible to predict. Even when they do occur, it is certainly not a signal that symbolic, descriptive, or indeed substantive representation of women is likely to follow in the years to come. Although critics of equality of outcome approaches have suggested that this is simply because more women need to be encouraged to stand and have advocated the use of training and confidence building events; logical analysis of the cycle of barriers that women face in the previous diagram suggests otherwise.

Simply put, without a critical mass of women in leadership positions to:

- Be role models
- Change the perception of how a leader 'looks or behaves'
- Challenge gendered role stereotypes
- Create changes/access to democracy
- Enforce women's equality of outcome at all levels,

…there will not be a sufficient increase in the number of women leaders, regardless of the amount of confidence or skills development that is offered to potential women candidates; particularly as capacity building alone does not address the structural and cultural barriers which are predominantly controlled and benefitted from by men.

What's the solution?

At this point it is pertinent to ask- how do we overcome the double bind (or Catch-22) created whereby women must be in power in order to remove barriers to power for women?

There are three likely schools of thought by way of answers to this question;

The first: equality of opportunity created by those already in power

The second: equality of outcome created by (quota) women in power

The third: equality of outcome created by all; led by, and with the equal participation of, women leaders

There is likely to be a significant amount of support initially for the **first method**, as indeed there has been by a large number of the unions participating in the 'Diversifying the Movement' project. This method would essentially by its very nature, utilise an 'incremental-track' model that creates small changes in the provision of opportunities for women in order to 'empower' them to take part. This is often the method favoured by those who believe that equality of outcome is in fact less democratically legitimate than equality of opportunity as they believe it creates unfair advantages for women, and therefore is not a meritocracy. *"This is especially true among the male elites, many of whom attribute women's underrepresentation to choices made by individual women, rather than to structural patterns of discrimination"* (Meier 2008)

This method is problematic for a number of reasons. Firstly, as with attempts to solve women's underrepresentation in leadership by relying solely on capacity development, it places women as the cause of the problem, a rhetoric that is not unlike the damaging narrative of 'victim blaming' associated with women's perceived responsibility in experiencing sexual harassment, domestic violence or rape.

Secondly, it does not allow the control of what should be an intersectional women's liberation movement to be led by women; instead largely relying on those who may have limited experience of oppression to not only understand but enforce initiatives that truly address the core cause of women's underrepresentation, often requiring honest and difficult personal reflections on unconscious bias and privilege. Although of course it is true that some of those currently in power (albeit a minority) identify as women, the reality is that the majority do not, and even those that do have often experienced at least a level of privilege as, for example- either a white, straight, cis or non-disabled woman, or a combination of many privileges, which in turn may lead to less barriers in gaining positions of representational leadership. Finally, and perhaps most damagingly- any initiatives, even 'watered down' equal opportunities strategies, let alone any equal outcomes activities, are far less likely to be followed through to completion, as the liberation of a majority group of people largely unconnected to the minority power group is unlikely be seen as a priority by most of those who do not share such experiences of oppression. This is evidenced by the simple fact that women's leadership or liberation as a whole has almost never been made a priority by organisations which have not been given direction (strategically or otherwise) by a diverse group of leaders.

The second method is often seen as the complete antithesis of the first, as a move from equal opportunities to equal outcomes by manufacturing guarantees for women to be elected. Indeed, this is certainly not a comfortable or even remotely acceptable suggestion for many, due to

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previously outlined reasoning in this chapter. Critics of this method are often quick to imply that creating quotas for women (or other underrepresented groups) in any structure creates a system that is un-meritocratic and that in fact discriminates against men. However, this response requires a level of analysis that is commonly overlooked by supporters of equality of opportunity.

Firstly, the argument that is posed makes the presumption that the current democratic systems in place are in fact effective meritocracies, referring to the principles that 'anyone has the choice to stand for election' and that the winner is 'the best person for the job' because the membership choose democratically. This implies that there is no level of bias or discrimination at all within the structures that exist, and that women elected within a system that employs quotas are in fact primarily elected due to their gender rather than any other factor.

Following this line of argument logically would suggest that those organisations who already implement quotas are constantly electing or employing women who are not 'the best person for the job', which in theory should mean that these organisations face some level of failure or at least reduced efficiency. In fact it is quite the opposite: in companies that substantially increase the numbers of women on their senior boards- profits are on average 26% higher than companies that do not have a balanced board (Burtt, 2012); furthermore, in the political world, quotas increase- the rate at which women voters contact their political representatives (Childs 2004, Kudva 2003), the number of women entering politics, acquiring political skills and developing sustained political ambition (Bhavnani 2009, Geissel and Hust 2005), the perception (from all genders) that the organisation is more democratic than it was previously (Schwindt-Bayer and Mishler 2005), and the number of women in leadership from marginalised groups (Mehta 2002).

Merit for election in students' unions is often focussed on an individual's ability to demonstrate a set of skills that fit into our (often masculinised) ideals of leadership which given the socialisation of gendered norms is problematic within itself (Brooks, 2014). However, further to this, the value of opinion brought through diversity of experience (often through identity and the oppression which is therefore connected) is often not considered as merit, and therefore it is challenging to understand the concept of meritocracy which critics are referring to when denouncing the legitimacy of quotas. There appears to be no logical reason why identity cannot constitute some form of merit within elections.

Secondly, this argument implies that there is something 'wrong' with the idea of women being guaranteed equal representation. Although it is true that all officers have the ability to consult with their members, there is a question about the fairness or effectiveness of women not being proportionally represented within decision making bodies, elected or otherwise.

The principle of positive action in relation to representation has been established and endorsed internationally (Dahlerup, 2012) In fact, the UK is 57th in the world with 22.5% women's representation, even given voluntary quotas adopted by political parties (which in the main, are never implemented). This is below countries such as Rwanda (63.7%), South Africa (43.5%), Senegal (42.7%), Nicaragua (40.2%), Belgium (39.3%), Mexico (36.8%) and Uganda (34.9%), all of whom have legislated quotas rather than voluntary ones (quotaproject.org). International human rights groups and policy proposal bodies including the United Nations and the European Commission both view quotas as legally sound, if not also required steps for equality of women's representation politically. The European Commission has twice stated that the basic principles and laws of equality should not prevent states from 'maintaining or adopting measures providing for specific advantages in order to make it easier for the under-represented gender to pursue a vocational activity' (including the selection of candidates in elections) (Russell, 2000). Furthermore, the UN alongside

CEDAW (Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women) recommends that organisations and government should *"make more use of temporary special measures such as positive action or quota systems to advance women's integration into education, the economy, politics and employment."* In short, quotas are a means to an end, not only favoured by a significant amount of the international community, but also proven to work within the systems that are currently in place.

Finally, and as the most modern theory within debate surrounding women's representation in the student movement, is **the third method** which essentially involves completely re-imagining the form democracy takes, alongside the use of a guaranteed involvement of women (and other traditionally underrepresented groups) as a basis of legitimacy. This was often touched upon by the activities and conversations of many of the unions on the Diversifying the Movement project, despite an outward preference for equal opportunities work. Some theorists question whether the substantive representation of all women will ever really be secured through better access to existing structures of representative politics. Many suggest that this aim actually requires a 'sizeable infusion of radical democracy' (Dobrowolsky, 2000)

To focus solely on narrow gender equality policies (such as quotas) within traditional structures is to remain bound within a discourse of institutional politics that propagates individualism, exclusivity, obfuscation, adversarialism and confrontation (on the whole these are traits that are almost exclusively socialised as masculine). It revolves around current institutional democratic constructs at a time when members are increasingly calling for something more than the traditional institutions of democratic governance [as is reflected in chapter 1 of this report] (Quota project report, date unknown) The point of democratic participation is to manufacture through debate and group negotiation, rather than to discover and aggregate, the common good. The ideal is one of progressive cultural change and redefining of leadership, alongside democratic decision-making arising from deliberative procedures that are inclusive and mutual, and that do not recreate the barriers that women face from the system currently in play (capacity, structural and cultural).

Yet, the move to direct and deliberative rather than representative democracy does not overcome the need for a quotas debate. Women's access to deliberative spaces will, as some deliberative democrats accept, need to be ensured if the outcome of the deliberations is to be just (Williams, 2000). It recommends, in other words, that one go beyond tinkering or tailoring existing structures, to transform them entirely.

***"The fastest track to gender equality will entail not only the adoption of gender quotas, but also the embracing of gender mainstreaming in relation to the shaping of the political institutions themselves."* (Squires, 2004)**

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Conclusion

In summary, the three main schools of thought on methods by which to approach women's underrepresentation are:

1. To retain the same structures and leadership, pushing a stronger equality agenda (likely focus on equality of opportunity) in the hope that this will encourage more women to stand for election

2. To retain the same structures and create guaranteed change to the leadership with a 'front loading' of women via the implementation of quotas, with the expectation that this will produce policies and processes that remove barriers and create a virtuous circle of women's leadership and engagement in elections

3. To accept that there may be such major flaws in the traditional system of democracy employed within the student movement, that there needs to be a new, effectively inclusive structure created. Choose to redesign democracy in a way that is truly meaningfully accessible for all, and given legitimacy by a guaranteed minimum number of women at every level of engagement (imperatively including in the design of any new system)

To conclude, women's representation faces a Catch-22 situation where there are not enough women in positions of power to create the change required to increase the number of women in, and with, power. For numerous reasons, many individuals and organisations seem unwilling to try differential treatment for equal outcomes, instead choosing equal opportunities which almost inevitably create unequal results. Unfortunately, without a significant number of women in positions of power we cannot expect to create sustainable change- logically it can be argued that these changes would have happened already if it were the case that these kinds of things were possible or prioritised without the presence of a critical mass of women leaders. Given that this is the case, and that capacity building/equal opportunities methods alone have not made the picture significantly better over a number of years, we must utilise something more radical in order to 'frontload' the number of women leaders that may thereby create change, or face waiting even longer for true equality.

Considering the relative flexibility of the democracy of students' unions and NUS- there should be a legislative guarantee of women's and all underrepresented groups' representation, as a part of revolutionising democratic structures and understandings of leadership in such a way that quotas become less of a manufactured tool and more of a safety lock within an effective democracy that actively engages and utilises proportional (women's) representation.

"If the outcome is not equal, we can be reasonably sure the opportunities were also not so." **(Phillips, 2004)**

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