

Aberdeen University Students' Association Democracy review

1 Background and goal

Aberdeen University Students' Association (AUSA) approached NUS to request support in undertaking a democratic review. It was agreed that this work would form 3 main parts:

- Officer Role Review
- Democratic Process review
- Relationship between democratic processes and the Trustee Board

This was to be conducted in line with Quality Students' Unions' Democracy criteria, which is measured against the "Graeme Smith Democratic Goods" model.

This report outlines the key findings from the exercise and makes recommendations for future development in line with NUS' Quality Students' Unions (QSU).

The report is the analysis of the below methodology and naturally points to recommendations for improvement, rather than celebrating the great things that the association does. Please bear this in mind when reading elements of the report which may feel critical; nothing contained within is a personal attack on the work or contributions of individuals, but rather an assessment of where focused attention would provide the most impact for the long-term sustainability and effectiveness of the organisation.

2 Methodology

To inform the recommendations, the research comprised:

- Proposal brief development with Lawson Ogubie (AUSA President) and Scott Carle (AUSA Representative Services Manager)
- AUSA student democracy survey developed for this brief, receiving 835 responses (out of total Aberdeen University student population of 13316). This equates to 6.3% of the student population across UG, PG and international campuses. The survey was open for approximately 5 weeks and was supported by a series of shout outs and stalls hosted by the President to encourage participation. A further breakdown of this survey is found in section 4
- A series of focus group sessions held at AUSA on 24th October, attended by Officers, Trustees, Student Council Chair and Student Council Members. An analysis of these focus groups can be found in section 5
- NUS also reviewed the following documents in advance of the site visit: AUSA Constitution and AUSA Bye-Laws
- Teleconference with Dr. Bill Harrison, Director of Learning and Teaching, School of Natural and Computing Sciences
- Drawing on democratic reviews carried out over the last 5 years in NUS

3 AUSA Context

The University was founded in 1495, making it the 3rd oldest Scottish and 5th oldest UK university.

AUSA as a single representative body is comparatively new, with three distinct organisations coming together only in 1999 to be the voice of Aberdeen University students. Traditions from each of these bodies continue to be seen in the make-up of the students' association, but the constitution itself is very new.

As of the 2nd October 2018, the demographics of Aberdeen University students can be broken down as follows:

- 23% of students are Post Graduates, with 2/3 of these being taught Post Graduates
- 50% of students are described as being Scottish, with the next largest category of nationality groupings being EU, at 22%, Rest of the world at 18% and the rest of the UK the lowest grouping at 10%
- The gender breakdown is quite even, with 51% women and 49% men (there is no information available as to students not defining into either of these categories)

The Students' Association's last sabbatical elections saw 10 candidates for 5 positions, with 2 being uncontested (Education and Communities). There were 1404 votes cast in this election, representing 10.5% of the electorate.

AUSA has an active student council, made up of elected representatives. In the academic year 2017-18, it passed 9 policies, with 7 policies being passed in the preceding 2 years.

4 Student survey demographic breakdown and headline figures

Demographics

There was a slight gender bias, with 58% of the respondents describing themselves as a woman, compared to the 51% representation across the university members.

92% respondents were studying Full Time. There was no access to information as to the spread of study mode across the institution.

The level of study was almost directly mapped onto the university demographic, with 77% respondents being undergraduates and 16% Post Graduate Taught.

There was a strong over-representation of EU students answering the survey, at the expense of Scottish students, who make up 50% of the overall population but only 32% of the survey respondents. EU students accounted for 37% of the survey respondents, versus 22% of the population. The Rest of the UK and Rest of the World students were mapped very well from overall population to survey respondents.

There were four categories with distinct majorities in a particular characteristic: Less than 7% respondents indicated that they had dependents, nearly 80% were aged between 18 and 25, almost 85% said that they did not have a disability and approximately 68% self-defined as White. The statistics for the overall student population are not available, so it is not possible to compare these with the survey responses.

There was a good mix of engaged, unengaged and new students in terms of the sabbatical elections as per Figure 1. However, with the 2018 election turnout being at 10%, these numbers indicate a strong over-representation of those who participated in those sabbatical elections completing the survey.

Did you vote in this year's AUSA sabbatical officer election in March 2018?

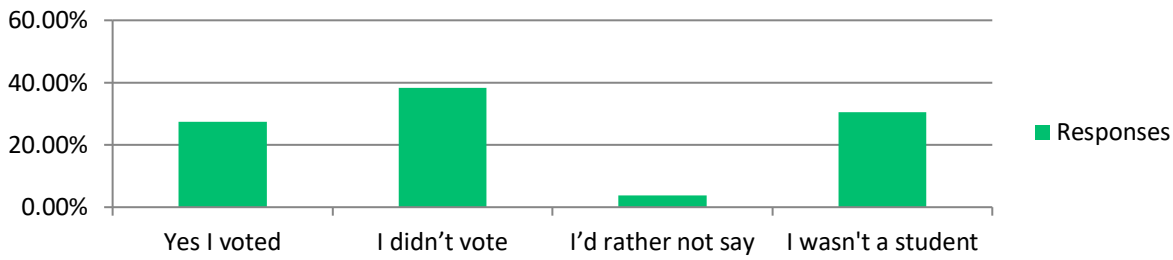
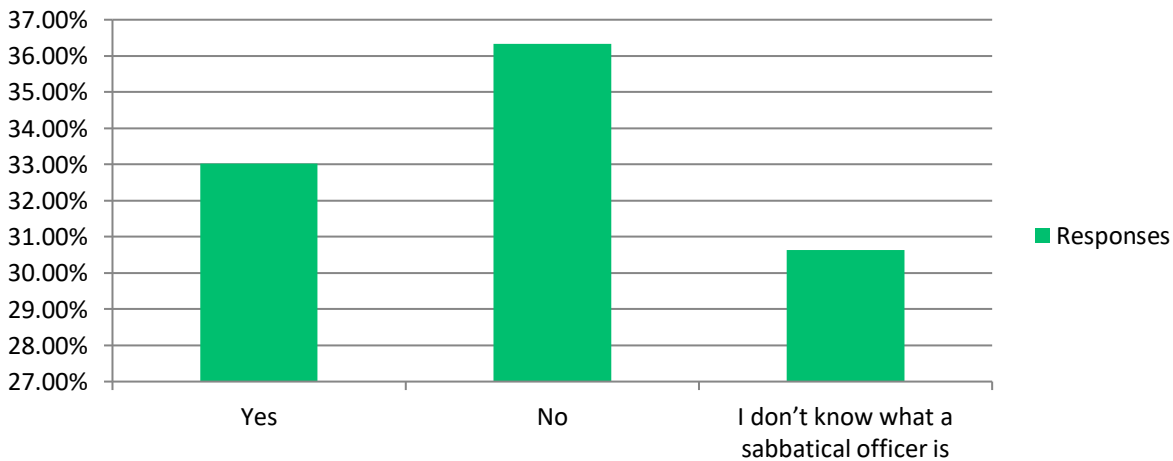


Figure. 1

Yes, I voted	27.43%
I didn't vote	38.36%
I'd rather not say	3.68%
I wasn't a student	30.52%

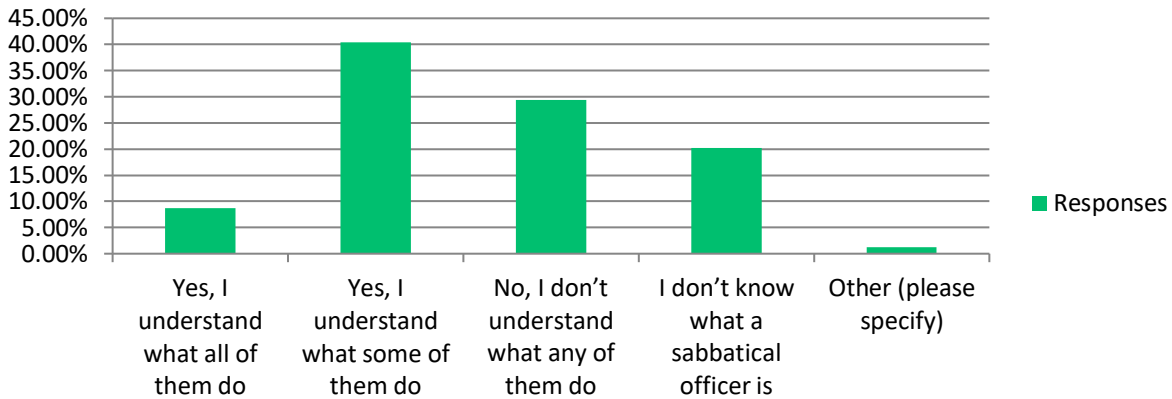
Knowledge of the Students' Association

Can you name any of the positions that make up the elected sabbatical officer team?



This question was supplemented with another asking respondents to name the positions they were aware of. The results demonstrated a significant skew towards the roles of President and Education Officer, meaning that even the 33% above who answered yes were not fully aware of the range of posts. This underlines the overall lack of knowledge about the positions and what they are there to do. Some respondents specifically said, "I know the role names, but not what they do." A subsequent question confirms this, with only 8.8% students saying they knew what all the officers did.

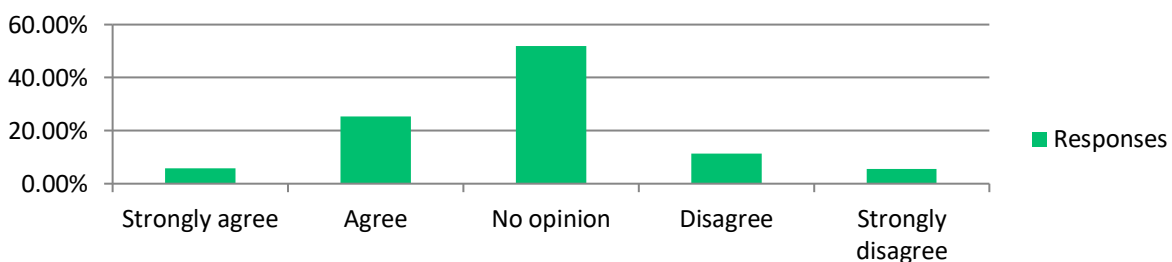
Do you feel like you understand what the elected sabbatical officers do?



Yes, I understand what all of them do	8.76%
Yes, I understand what some of them do	40.40%
No, I don't understand what any of them do	29.38%
I don't know what a sabbatical officer is	20.20%
Other (please specify)	1.27%

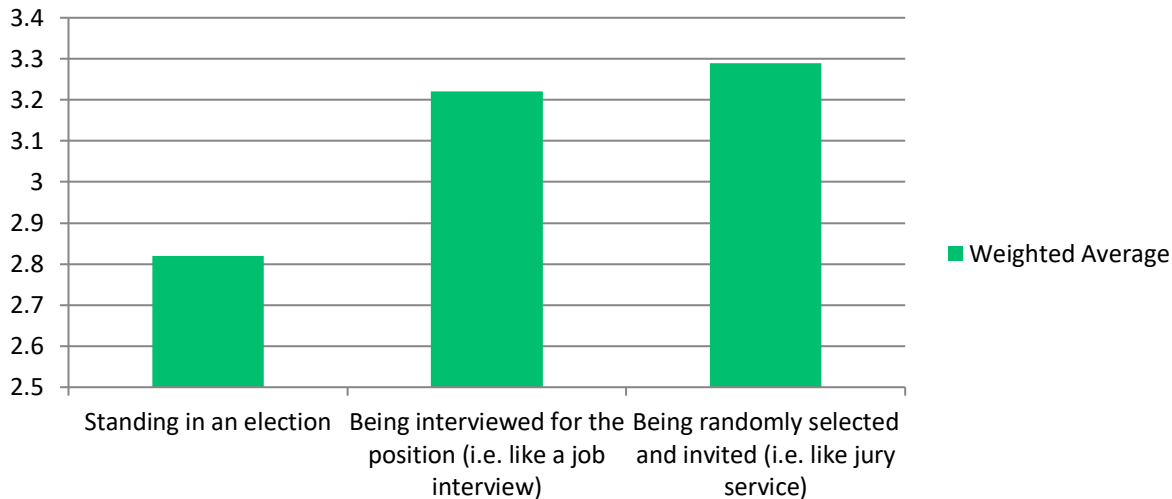
Given the lack of knowledge about the sabbaticals, it is no surprise that the majority of survey respondents had no opinion as to whether they could hold them to account. It was encouraging to see that only a small number of students (11.4%) strongly disagreed with the statement, but there is obviously room to make improvements in this area.

To what extent, if at all, do you agree with the following statement? 'I feel I can hold the sabbatical officers at AUSA to account'



Strongly agree	5.70%
Agree	25.30%
No opinion	52.02%
Disagree	11.40%
Strongly disagree	5.58%

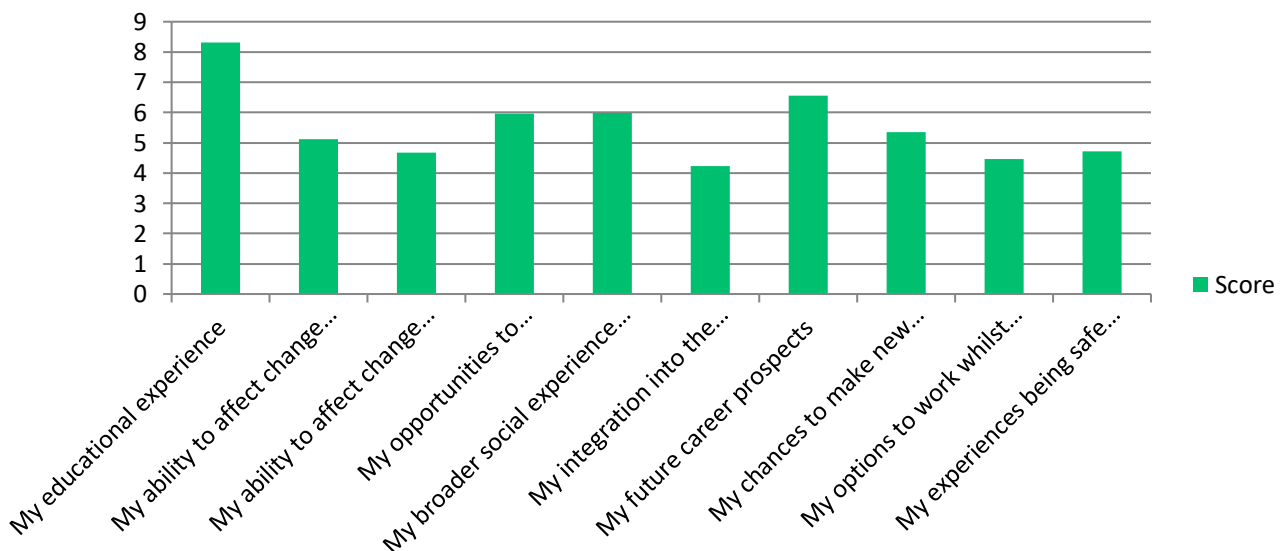
How comfortable would you feel taking part in the following processes in order to become a decision maker within AUSA? (weighted average comes in out of 5)



In addition, a significant number of students were not inclined to stand for election themselves. 42% respondents would be slightly or not at all comfortable with standing in an election, with 35% feeling comfortable or very comfortable. For the other options, almost 50% would be comfortable or very comfortable being interviewed or randomly selected against just under 30% feeling slightly or very uncomfortable.

What is important to students?

What areas are most important to you



My educational experience	72.5% ranked 1 or 2
My ability to affect change locally	16.9% ranked 1 or 2
My ability to affect change nationally	13.2% ranked 1 or 2
My opportunities to participate in activities such as sport or volunteering	15.4% ranked 1 or 2
My broader social experience of university	15.5% ranked 1 or 2
My integration into the communities within Aberdeen city	5.4% ranked 1 or 2
My future career prospects	35.8% ranked 1 or 2
My chances to make new friends	7.8% ranked 1 or 2
My options to work whilst studying	8.5% ranked 1 or 2
My experiences being safe and accessible	12.3% ranked 1 or 2

My educational experience	9.1% ranked 9 or 10
My ability to affect change locally	23.2% ranked 9 or 10
My ability to affect change nationally	31.1% ranked 9 or 10
My opportunities to participate in activities such as sport or volunteering	11.8% ranked 9 or 10
My broader social experience of university	7.1% ranked 9 or 10
My integration into the communities within Aberdeen city	27.2% ranked 9 or 10
My future career prospects	12.6% ranked 9 or 10
My chances to make new friends	11.4% ranked 9 or 10
My options to work whilst studying	31.1% ranked 9 or 10
My experiences being safe and accessible	31.2% ranked 9 or 10

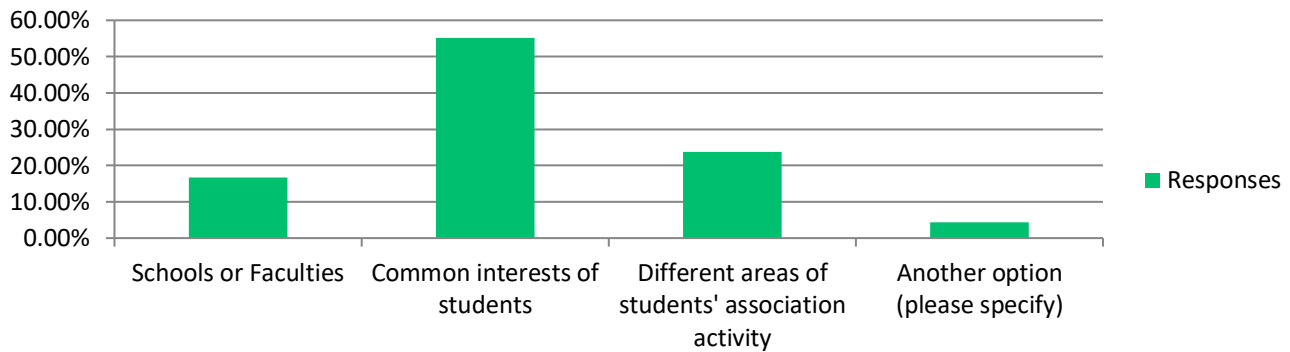
There was a clear pattern of responses from AUSA students of their education experience being of real importance to them, with 72.5% ranking this in the top two priorities and the nearest other area being their future career prospects with 35.8% in the first two ranking spots. The survey data was complemented by the focus groups, where the educational experience or achieving the relevant qualification was the first response by almost every interviewee.

The least important areas for respondents were their experiences being safe and accessible (indicating that they feel this is already the case as it is unlikely that students do not want to feel safe), their ability to affect change nationally and their options to work whilst studying.

What should officers focus on?

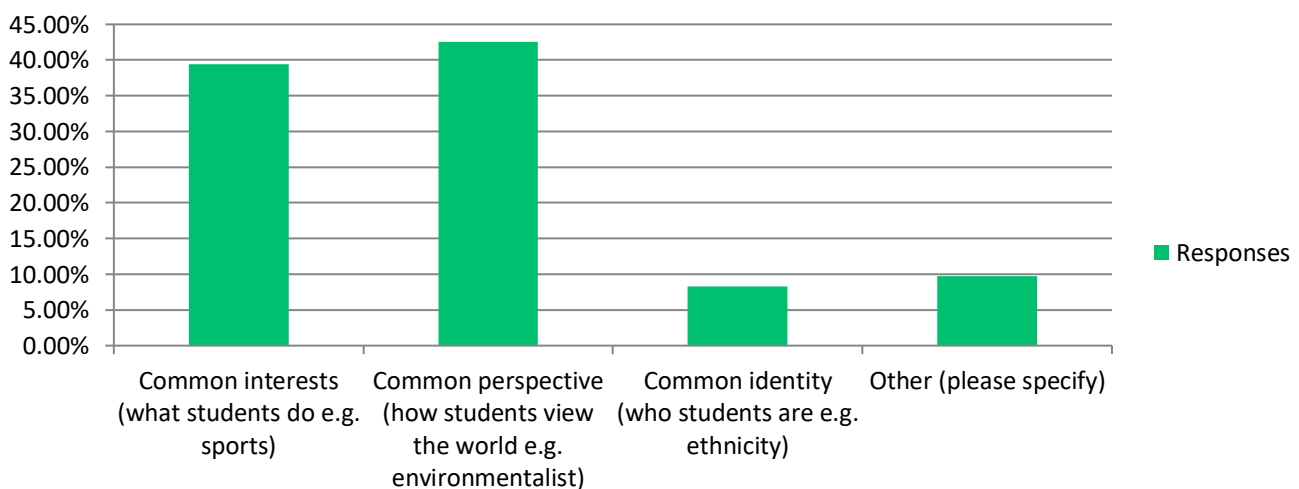
Schools or Faculties	16.61%
Common interests of students	55.23%
Different areas of students' association activity	23.83%
Another option (please specify)	4.33%

What areas do you think your officers should cover?



There is a clear preference for officers' roles to be divided across the common interests of students, rather than over academic areas or via the activities of the students' association. This would indicate that the officer functions themselves are probably not too far from what they should be; the primary focus should be on the communication of what they accomplish and how to get involved in their work. This suggestion is supported by an additional question regarding how students themselves would prefer to be grouped:

How do you think students should be grouped to be represented when decisions are being made?

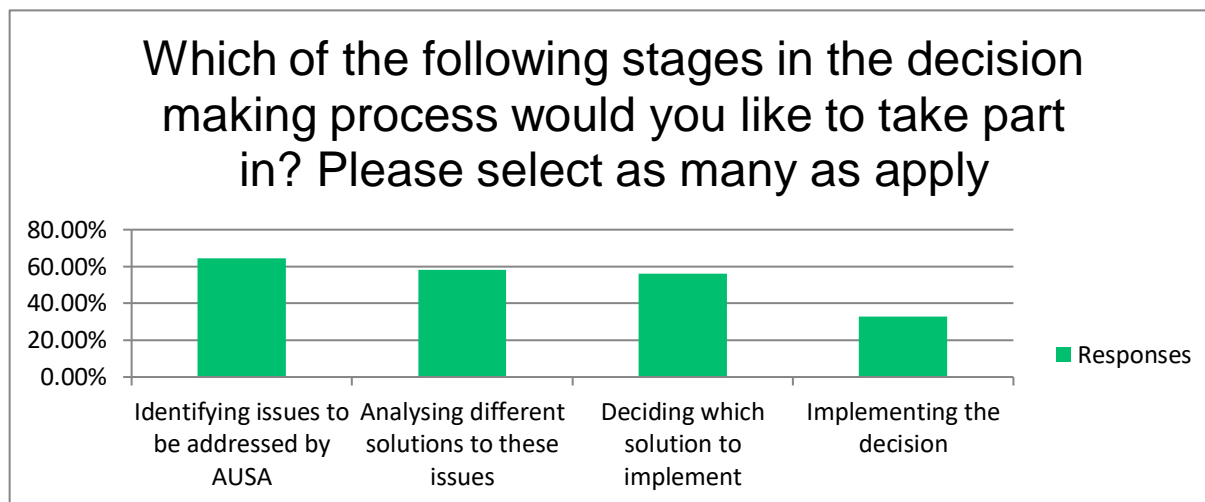


Common interests (what students do e.g. sports)	39.41%
Common perspective (how students view the world e.g. environmentalist)	42.51%
Common identity (who students are e.g. ethnicity)	8.33%
Other (please specify)	9.75%

Who should make the students' association's decisions?

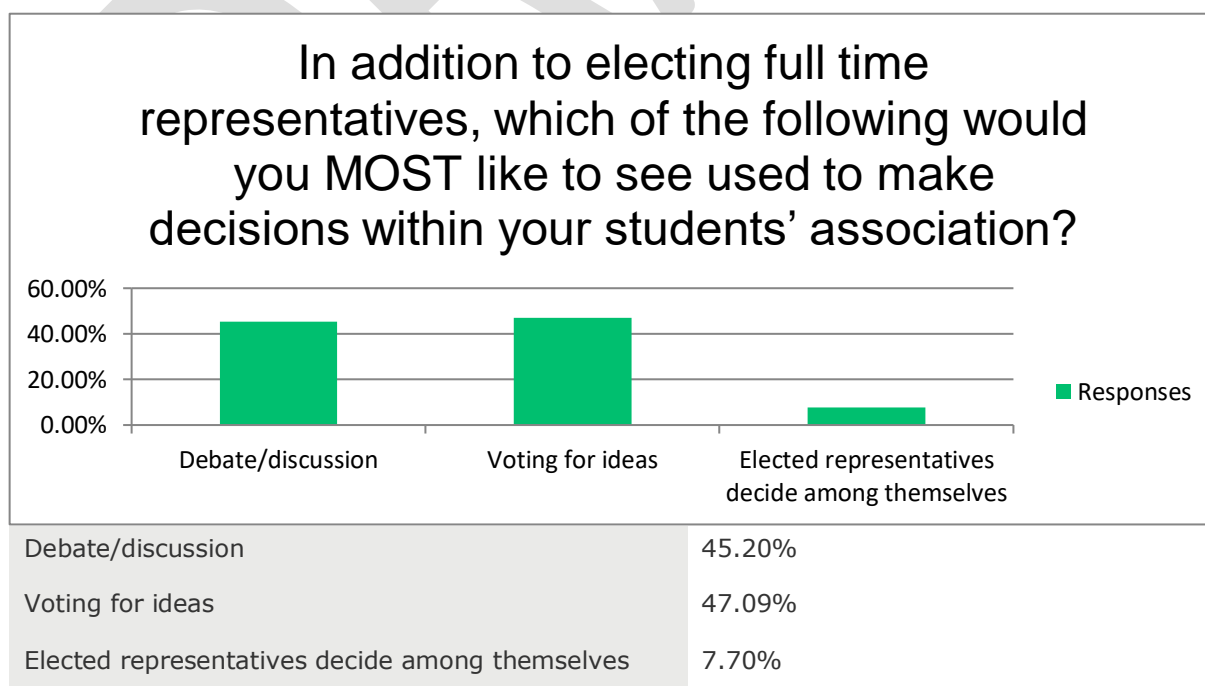
81.3% respondents said that it was important or very important that officers consulted with them before making decisions, but 68% said that it was also important or very important for officers to use their discretion to make decisions based on evidence. This indicates that students are keen to be involved at appropriate points in decision making, but do not need to be consulted on every element of this process.

A further question confirms this indication:



Identifying issues to be addressed by AUSA	64.47%
Analysing different solutions to these issues	58.35%
Deciding which solution to implement	56.05%
Implementing the decision	32.92%

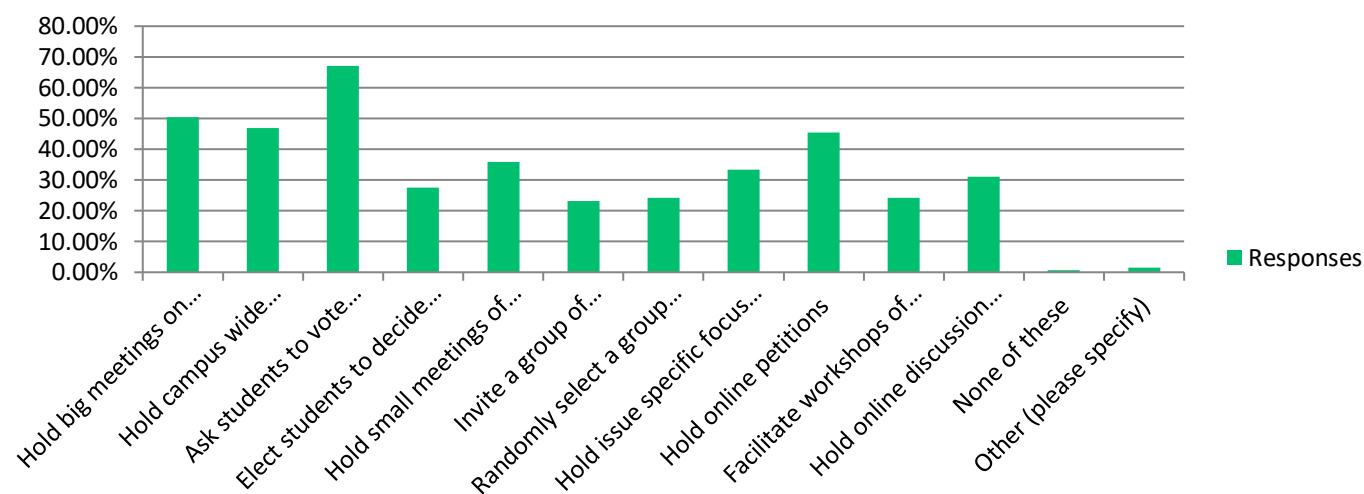
The most compelling statistic about decision making comes half way through the survey:



Students clearly want a say in decision making and current structures get in the way.

How should the students' association make their decisions?

Which method(s) do you think should be used to make decisions within your students' association?



Hold big meetings on campus open to all students	50.44%
Hold campus wide ballots where everyone gets a vote	46.95%
Ask students to vote using mobile phone Apps	67.15%
Elect students to decide on your behalf	27.62%
Hold small meetings of students with specific responsibilities and interests	35.76%
Invite a group of students to decide after questioning experts on the issue	23.26%
Randomly select a group of demographically representative students to decide (i.e. a jury)	24.13%
Hold issue specific focus groups	33.43%
Hold online petitions	45.35%
Facilitate workshops of invited students	24.27%
Hold online discussion forums	31.10%
None of these	0.73%
Other (please specify)	1.45%

Students have indicated they are happy with a range of options for decision making, with the most popular being a mobile voting app, with more than 67% of respondents expressing a preference for this option. Other high scorers were holding big meetings on campus open to all students, campus wide ballots for all students and online petitions. The least popular options were a jury or workshop style set up. In addition to this, 83% students preferred decision making to be based on what the majority of students wanted rather than requiring all students to be in favour, or another method of democratic decision making. Interestingly, there was a slightly counterintuitive response to the question about quality versus member-wide decision making. Almost identical percentages were scored for the import of both all students having their say and the decision being of the highest quality. With the information gleaned from the focus groups, it can be surmised that this is in relation to the finer detail elements of some policy making, with students recognising that a broader context is always at play. With this in mind, the role of sabbatical officers and student council can be honed to better support the will of the students in this area.

5 Stakeholder feedback: Strengths and areas for development

To help inform the democratic reviews recommendations for the future, this section deals with the themes that came across from the focus groups, as well as the student survey in respect of strengths and development areas.

5.1 Transparency

Transparent decision-making is a fundamental element of any modern democracy. This section considers what changes could be made to improve how transparent AUSA's decision making is.

5.1.1 Internal Transparency: strengths and areas for development

Consistently throughout the focus groups, three responses came up the most often when considering the strengths of AUSA:

- Societies and Clubs
- Welfare and Advice
- Engaging those students who are already engaged

Every single interviewee said that AUSA was welcoming and helpful if you knew it was there and asked for help or support.

However, as consistent as the strengths was the overwhelming consensus that the association's biggest weakness was general communication, resulting in significant under-engagement. There was a clear desire to make the necessary changes to improve in this area, although no agreement as to how this could be achieved. Some interviewees suggested that a lack of understanding of the student population contributed to this communication gap, which might be worth exploring.

Individual focus groups highlighted that the allocation of funds to different student groups was unclear, which obviously is contrary to the ideal of democratic transparency. Clear guidelines, published at the beginning of each year, as to how the various committees distribute grants would be helpful to overcome this perception.

Some groups also mentioned that the range of events was inconsistent, with Freshers' Week generally touted as a great success, but with many non-alcoholic events subsequent to this being felt to be sub-par. Since in many students' associations one avenue to general engagement is through the social events provided by the organisation, attention should be given to researching the expectations of members on the events side of the operation and steps taken to improve these.

5.2 Inclusiveness: strengths and areas for development

The makeup of student council in itself is quite inclusive and includes representatives of minority groups and the chair is offered training to feel confident. However, there is an issue of attendance at student councils so in terms of voice, it is often the 'usual suspects' that are heard, especially as non-elected students very rarely attend. In addition, many interviewees indicated that speaking at these meetings was extremely stressful, with several councils descending into full blown arguments, rather than focussing on political discourse and debate. This lack of inclusivity can be seen to have contributed to the wider issue of student engagement, so consideration should be given to updating the council meetings themselves to be more welcoming and inclusive to those who have not received the relevant training.

5.3 Popular Control: strengths and areas for development

Students do have the ability to submit motions and therefore do have the option to influence the workings of the union, but this is not widely known and has to be done through Council. Motions are only ever passed at council, with no decision being taken to the wider student body in recent memory. This contradicts the will expressed in the student survey, so consideration should be

given to developing and advertising a new process of making decisions. Each focus group agreed that an ideal outcome from this review would be more involvement and control of AUSA by students, which is an excellent start.

5.4 Considered judgement: strengths and areas for development

Stakeholders agreed that in the main, students are currently not kept well informed about the democratic events and processes of the students' association. The preference from the student survey for decision-making online would be one obvious way of trying to rectify this.

Updated information on the website is key, as well as blog or vlogs to explain more complicated processes, or to accompany the usual uploading of minutes from committees or council. Accessible ways to communicate facts and figures for decisions was also highlighted as something that could be done fairly easily with infographics or blogs.

In addition, making changes to the function of student council so that it was able to use its more engaged membership to consider the most complicated elements of policy making would add real weight to the area of considered judgement.

6 Principles for change

This section makes outlines the principle upon which recommendations will be made. These are based on stakeholder responses, desk research and an in-depth understanding of the sector over the past 20. All recommendations are made in line with the QSU framework which is referenced regularly throughout. In addition, there is one good practice recommendation regarding the overall constitution:

- It is strongly suggested that the unincorporated model of AUSA exposes it, and especially its trustees, to greater risk and that consideration should be given to altering this at the earliest opportunity

It was felt that the more general democratic recommendations related to 3 key areas:

Engagement and communications

Accessibility

Student control

Included in each of these areas will be examples specifically relating to digital enhancements. This was felt to be of critical importance to improvements in student engagement.

It is strongly recommended that AUSA engage with the QSU framework for union development to provide a route plan for future democracy development work and to understand success measures. QSU can be used as a continuous tool for development and a source of ideas and inspiration, as well as a self-assessment tool.

6.1 Engagement & communications (Inclusiveness/Considered Judgement/Transparency)

To achieve very good in QSU, an association would be expected to provide detailed information which is accessible, relevant and timely to ensure that members can contribute to the decision-making processes of the union in an informed way. At a minimum, the development of a candidate's guide for elections which helps set out role profiles, background to the union, elections logistics and explains bylaws could help achieve this level.

- The association should create a comms plan for the elections process more generally that can be adapted for different elections, which considers the different audiences involved and what information needs to be available for each audience. This plan should define key messaging at specific times and locations, informed by previous election data and include

targeted marketing for harder to reach groups. Target advertising of elections to specific departments who had a low turnout in the elections. Involve course and school reps in this process.

- The association should consider how it monitors diversity in all areas of its activity including voting and standing for election so that it can action plan to drive up engagement based on data. The more information in terms of candidate and voters background, the more sophisticated engagement and communications planning can become.
- Consider discussing with the university ways in which simple, important information about the association can be disseminated at different points in students' time at Aberdeen to raise awareness of the association more generally, e.g. at acceptance of an offer, registration, arrival.
- Consider blogs and vlogs to update members about outcomes from committee, council and trustee meetings. Utilise the vast experience, expertise and resources of the university's media departments and students to create engaging communications and content
- Ensure all content on the website supports the raising of awareness of the officers and their roles.
- Consider an internal newsletter/update email for staff or all staff meetings where important decisions at trustee and senior management level are communicated to all staff, as well as a place to celebrate impact and achievement.
- Ask council representatives about barriers to attendance - Are these issues that of access (I have lectures at that time), or are they cultural (there was nothing that much on the agenda that seemed relevant to me)? Consider 'doodle polls' or other software to find times that suit the majority or all participants.
- Consider providing staff support for officers (volunteer & sabbatical) to prepare effectively to give reports that are more accessible to the student body e.g. a blog updated before student council.

6.2 Accessibility (Considered Judgement/Inclusiveness)

- It is recommended that the association undertake to review all of its byelaws with a view to simplifying and developing sufficient flexibility within the rules. Strip out any undue process that has been hindering progress. The current laws are cumbersome and unnecessarily complicated. NUS has some existing model documents, especially regarding elections, which the association may find useful.
- Once a review of bylaws is completed, the association should consider how it can regularly review all of its bylaws and process at once perhaps on a triennial basis therefore allowing time to test and embed process before undertaking review. This type of approach would help ensure that majority of the association's policies, processes and structures are current and generally adhered to by all, which forms part of QSU's 'very good' criteria.
- It is important for language to be simple, easy to understand and easily transferable to other situations to improve engagement. Consider changing inaccessible and specific language in all democratic systems and processes.
- Update the web pages to include accessible information on roles and committees - who decides what, why and how students can get involved.
- Upload minutes from meetings (with confidential info redacted) onto the AUSA website so it is accessible for those who want to look it up - ensuring that information is also provided in

more engaging and accessible formats too, like blogs, Facebook lives or stories, Snapchat updates etc.

- Consider refreshing the induction for all committee members and the trustee board so they feel comfortable in engaging fully with decision making and discussion. It would be particularly useful to hold some of this training at the same time to aid understanding of the interplay between council and the trustee board.
- Members of committees need to have sight of the agenda and paperwork in good time to be able to read them and consider them properly for decisions made to be meaningful. Consider creating a sustainable and consistent approach to collating and sending out papers, and make sure there is staff support to make this possible, in addition to clear deadlines for members which need to be adhered to. Perhaps they could be posted online somewhere in a private group on a social media or other online platform?

6.3 Student Control (Popular Control)

- The role of the Executive Committee was unclear to members of the focus groups, which is probably because it became redundant with the creation of the trustee board. OSCR is very clear that the trustee board is the sovereign decision-making body of any charity; student council exists to ensure student democracy and policy making is enshrined and the Executive Committee is superfluous to requirements. Council's role is to oversee the Executive Committee, but all the Exec committee sit on council, making it a circular relationship and doubly surplus to requirements. It is strongly recommended that this committee is removed from the constitution.
- It is recommended that the association develop an online model of policy making which includes a mobile app. This should allow students to submit a range of suggestions, some of which might need further discussion and agreement, but many of which can simply be acted upon and reported back to the wider student population. For example, a suggestion to ban single use coffee cups might need a debate, whereas a suggestion to improve the toilet facilities can just be taken up. It is recommended that the 75% threshold for all referenda is lowered to a simple majority except in the case of constitutional changes or removal from office. The association should then develop a specific email communications strategy for democratic events and processes.
 - As an example, at Liverpool Guild, the four full-time officers decide if an idea that has received enough votes is straightforward and uncontroversial or more contentious and needs further consideration. Any ideas the officers deem straightforward are implemented by the Guild. These are generally ideas that do not involve competing interests. For example, the Guild received a proposal to put allergy information on food in their new catering outlet. Placing allergy information on food does not disadvantage students without allergies. So, the Guild can implement the idea without further discussion because the actions required to benefit one group of students (with allergies) do not compete with another (who do not). More contentious ideas are discussed at a Guild Summit, which is akin to a random student jury with quotas for age, gender, mode and year of study. A trained external facilitator helps students discuss the arguments for and against the motion. Following the discussion, there are three possible outcomes; participants can agree to approve the idea (with or without some changes), reject the idea or, if a consensus cannot be reached, send the idea to preferendum. Preferendum is similar to a referendum, a campus wide ballot when everyone has the opportunity to vote, but rather than giving students one option and asking them to vote yes or

no, a referendum presents students with a number of options and asked to rank them in order of preference.¹

- Consider introducing participatory budgeting for the societies fund to introduce more student control over the funding available for societies. You can find 4 separate case studies, important information to consider and even templates on the NUS Student Opportunities Hub.²
- Involvement in democracy shouldn't end at the decision being made. It is recommended that the proposer of a motion/idea should be involved in the implementation of it. For popular ideas, or ideas that come from a particular group of students, project groups can be involved in the implementation process, creating buy in and ensuring solutions are student led. This will also raise awareness of what AUSA does, and how it changes student life for the better.
- The role of the Executive Committee was unclear to members of the focus groups, which is probably because it became redundant with the creation of the trustee board. OSCAR is very clear that the trustee board is the sovereign decision-making body of any charity; student council exists to ensure student democracy and policy making is enshrined and the Executive Committee is superfluous to requirements. Council's role is to oversee the Executive Committee, but all the Exec committee sit on council, making it a circular relationship and doubly surplus to requirements. It is strongly recommended that this committee is removed from the constitution.

7 Specific recommendations

Please consider the recommendations as a whole before evaluating them individually, as they are inter-dependent

7.1 Overarching Governance: tidy and clarify

- 7.1.1 There are risks attached to the current unincorporated model of charitable status – becoming a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO) or Charitable Company Limited by Guarantee (CLG) would provide far greater protections for the Board individually, but also for the students' association more generally speaking. Now is the time to do this, as amendments to the constitution need to go through several layers of approval, including with OSCAR (Office of the Scottish Charity Regulator) before they can be implemented. If changes are being made elsewhere, it would make sense to update the other provisions at the same time
- 7.1.2 GDPR and the membership: there are places where the constitution requires the association to inform every member about upcoming meetings; this has proven difficult under GDPR and it is recommended that this is amended either to a general notice to members via all student channels or the consideration of removal of AGM requirements if the regular referenda suggestion (SEE 7.5 BELOW) is applied
- 7.1.3 It is unclear if the start and end dates for sabbatical officers tie in with the association' financial year – if they do not, it is recommended that they do. The financial year of a students' association makes most sense if it directly correlates to the change in decision makers. Officers starting part way through a financial year can end up with a skewed budget and leave the same legacy for their successors. Clearer reporting lines help prevent

¹ Liverpool Guild Case Study: This is What Democracies Look Like, *NUS Connect Resources*
<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/resources/this-is-what-democracies-looks-like>

² Society and Sports Grant Funding Processes, *NUS Student Opportunities Hub*
<http://studentopportunities.nus.org.uk/2013/10/29/grant-funding-processes/>

someone with significant control hiding poor financials in the confusion of overlapping budgets.

7.1.4 Trustee clarifications:

- Section 56 of the constitution outlines the process for the removal of a trustee, but does not specify if this excludes sabbatical trustees or the university nomination. Given their different appointment processes, a clarification as to how each type of trustee is appointed and removal would be helpful.
 - SUGGESTION:
 - Each type of trustee can be removed from office if one of the following happens:
 - A referendum of AUSA members with a minimum quorum of 15% where the majority of votes cast are for the removal of the trustee
 - A board resolution to remove the trustee is passed. Such a resolution would require minimum participation of one officer, one student and one lay trustee
 - If they are no longer eligible to be a trustee based on the requirements outlined herein or by law. For the avoidance of doubt, if a sabbatical officer ceases to be a trustee, they are no longer eligible to remain in the employ of AUSA as a sabbatical officer and vice versa
- Section 57 tries to clarify which trustees can vote on the removal of a student trustee, but does not define a conflict, or who would decide that. It could be argued that any friendship or professional relationship amounts to a conflict, which makes it challenging to enact this clause. Suggest clarifying language is developed.
 - SUGGESTION:
 - A conflict, in this case, is defined as a situation where another trustee has had material involvement in the events leading up to the decision to hold a vote on removal. Friendships or close working relationships do not amount to a conflict.
- Section 59 is the only section which refers to death removing a trustee from office – but only for sabbaticals. It is recommended that either the reference is removed entirely or applied to each type of trustee
- The practicalities for students running for sabbatical position in the first four weeks of term as per section 60 are problematic. Individuals will have made their choices about financing and academic progression by this point and a wave of graduating students will be removed from the pool of candidates. It is recommended that this section is changed to allow for second place candidates to take up office following the removal of a sabbatical officer before the academic year commences. In addition, interim arrangements might be explored to ensure that the *work* of the officer is not removed.
- Section 92 outlines decision making at board level as by majority. It is recommended that this is reviewed to be a consensus decision making model. All trustees are responsible for the decisions made at this level; majority voting leads to an increased likelihood of principled resignations and dissatisfaction amongst board members.

7.2 Removal of the Executive Committee Layer

- 7.2.1 Executive Committees are a hangover from before the Charities Act changed the charitable status of the students' association. They are no longer performing the functions they were designed to deliver and often cause confusion amongst members as to who does what. OSCR's guidance document: "Who's in Charge?" at Section C: "Control is not clear" a "Complex structure" gives an indication of how simplifying the structures can help everyone make better decisions.
- 7.2.2 Specifically at AUSA, the Executive Committee falls under the category "elected representatives make decisions on my behalf" which, as outlined above, a majority of students rejected as a positive model.
- 7.2.3 The officers who currently make up the Executive Committee need not be altogether deleted but should be swept into the subsequently recommended changes as outlined below. It is important to recognise the value to AUSA of independently organised student groups in a range of defined categories of Liberation.

7.3 Amendments to Student Council – REMIT – Focus on policy implementation

- 7.3.1 The remit of Students' Association Council has clearly been amended over time, but there remain contradictions with their powers as outlined in the Bye-Laws and in law. Currently, for example, Student Council has responsibility for the elections, specifically for overseeing the work of the elections committee. Responsibility for the SA election process lies very clearly in law with the Trustee Board of the students' association
- 7.3.2 Scrutiny of sabbatical officers' performance is extremely complicated. Following legal counsel as to the employment status of full-time elected officers, it has become clear that they enjoy the same rights as any other students' association employee – and the same responsibilities. As such, it is no longer appropriate that an open meeting of any and all students can comment on the performance of officers. **An alternative model for scrutiny is recommend**
- **Make clear in the constitution that officers are subject to employment grievance and disciplinary procedures, with rights and responsibilities in line with each staff member**
 - **The trustee board holds each of its members to account and should expect a report from officer trustees as to progress against their objectives on a regular basis**
 - **Students can call for a referendum**
- 7.3.3 Crossover with other student groups such as the Education Committee makes Council itself quite redundant in many aspects. Indeed, from a functioning perspective, the majority of input into this democratic review was given by Education Committee representatives who happened to be on Council.
- 7.3.4 *The recommended remit is the development and implementation of Students' Association Policy based on student input*

7.4 Amendments to Student Association Council – EXCLUSIVITY – made up of a combination of elected and appointed representatives, with simplified process

- 7.4.1 Even if the above were not problematic, the make-up of council and the subsequent restrictions on who can submit policy and amendments to the bye-laws is a big cause for concern given the student survey feedback. The vast majority of students wanted the opportunity to be involved in deciding what issues should be addressed *and* then taking the

necessary decisions. The current model excludes everyone except council members from this process.

- 7.4.2 In addition to the above, the complex nature of the submission, discussion and decision processes are inaccessible to unindoctrinated students. There were several comments during the focus groups about the importance of training the chair of council to the highest standard for this very reason. If the chair cannot understand the processes easily, how can a student who is observing for the first time?
- 7.4.3 Counter-intuitively, the remit and exclusivity are also problematic for some of its own members. In a clear attempt to broaden the membership of Council to make it more diverse, student groups are members of Council, but in reality, are turned off from attendance because the issues don't speak to their areas of interest.
- 7.4.4 Having a mix of elected and appointed representatives does two things; it ensures that typically under-represented groups have their voice at this important level, and it safeguards the range of *types* of student by appealing to different sensibilities
- 7.4.5 *The recommendation needs to be worked through with the group, but approx. 20-30 council members made up of current PTOs appointed by their own groups as previously, along with some elected student places and some appointed from the trustee board?*

➤ **SUGGESTION**

- **PTOs are appointed through their own groups as previously, but no longer called PTOs – Forum chairs?**
- **Approx 10 places for students – anyone can run, anyone can vote**
- **5 places reserved for appointment by the trustee board to ensure a spread of demographics**

7.5 Referenda – Remove current system and replace with regular campus-wide voting

- 7.5.1 The survey data was very clear; most students want to have more options for voting. This doesn't mean the SA has to utilise the current election/referenda processes for these; it is recommended that the mobile app and web-based regular voting systems are developed simultaneously to ensure they complement each other
- 7.5.2 A common-sense approach in responding to requests for change can add a real sense of "we can" to campus; if the Association and student groups are able to demonstrate their efficacy on a regular basis, more students are going to be excited about the potential for bigger change.
- 7.5.3 It is recommended that any student can make a request for something to be changed or improved. If it is a straightforward one (e.g. can someone fix the wild temperature fluctuations in xyz building) then the officers are empowered to progress this with the appropriate people (in this case, estates). Where the request is more complex, or controversial, there is another layer. For complexity (e.g. can there be improved cooking facilities in halls – what is improved? What do students want? How will we know if it is fixed?) then Student Council will work through these practical elements, request additional information, such as research, and decide on the appropriate course(s) of action. For controversy, it is recommended that more information is gathered and a set of arguments (developed by Student Council) is presented to the electorate for final decision.

7.5.4 **See Section 6.3 of this document for more in depth analysis of this process**

7.6 Officer roles – clearer division of remits, but names are open for discussion

- 7.6.1 The student survey data was clear; they don't understand *what* officers do. The names themselves are part of that issue, but not the primary one. Overall students' association communication is a priority for the Trustee Board and a delegated responsibility to the staff should develop an appropriate set of actions to improve this element.
- 7.6.2 The remits are unclear to the everyday student because they are not relevant. They are not relevant because they are not speaking to the issues students prioritise every day.
- 7.6.3 REMITS: TWO TYPES OF OFFICER:
- Those who help students with their priorities of course progression and their options post-university
 - Those who help students with their wish to be grouped by their common interests
- 7.6.4 The work being done doesn't have to be vastly different from what is in place now, but there should be an acceptance that currently having 1 officer focussing on "Education" doesn't speak to the huge responsibilities of this area. **Work needs to be done with the working group to refine this**

PRESIDENT – CHAIR OF THE BOARD, works with the university on post-course opportunity maximisation; careers service dept, marketing dept, reputation and risk management

ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE – Most of the current Education officer role, sits on Academic board, speaks to the university about the structure of academia and how it enables students to make their maximum progression

UNIVERSITY LIFE – looks after the relationship with the institution regarding accommodation, welfare, mental health, etc. Safeguards the student experience to allow them to be at their best academically

ABERDEEN SPORT – looks after all things sport at the University and within the association

ABERDEEN LIFE – looks after the way students want to group themselves by perspective, e.g. Campaigning issues such as liberation, environmentalist etc and student groups

7.6.5 The views of students regarding the number of full-time officers was not something which came across from the survey data. Typically, decisions about this are based on fiscal considerations; not just the remuneration for each of the officers, but also the staff support functions that would go underneath these remits. Having a greater or lesser number of officers does not automatically increase or decrease the volume of work done; representatives need to be able to spread their time across the relevant systems of the university (and beyond if required).

Further resources

In terms of resources to support this work, it is suggested that the NUS QSU resources hub is utilised:

<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/quality-students-unions/qsu-resources-hub/democracy>

In addition, the Student Engagement Partnership has a range of information and resources that can support overall engagement:

<https://www.nusconnect.org.uk/the-student-engagement-partnership-tsep/student-engagement-toolkit>

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January 2019

Report Opinions

The views and recommendations within this report are strictly confidential and should not be used for any other purpose than a source of assistance to consider options for its future. These views and recommendations are personal to the author and are based on the evidence of observations, interviews, and anecdotal evidence during the course of this assignment. They should not be the sole reason for taking appropriate management actions, and other appropriate evidence should be considered alongside these recommendations.