JUNE **2025**



FINAL REPORT

University of Aberdeen Students' Union Representation & Democracy Review

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The final report for the Democracy Review, at Aberdeen University Students' Union.





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1. Executive Summary

This review proposes a simplified structure where all students belong either to a 'student community' (e.g. liberation, belonging, or academic identity) or a 'student group' (e.g. society, sports club, or project). This eliminates the confusion of multiple naming conventions like forums, committees, and councils, while strengthening democratic clarity and inclusion.

The review sets out fourteen interlocking reforms (not eleven), supported by a clear roadmap and implementation plan.

This report presents the outcomes of the 2024–2025 **Democracy & Representation Review** conducted at the University of Aberdeen Students' Union. The review responds to growing concerns about visibility, accessibility, and the effectiveness of the Union's democratic structures in serving its diverse and evolving student population.

Purpose of the Review

The review set out to ensure representation:

- Brings about change and impact,
- Reaches as many students and stakeholders as possible
- Establishes a structure that supports campaigning
- Is student-led
- Has a modern approach
- Facilitates support, elevation, collaboration and leadership
- Enhances communication
- Encourages members to connect with a Students' Union community
- Increases visibility among students who engage with the SU.

Methodology

Over four months, the review gathered insights from across the student body and wider institution, including:

- 607 survey responses
- 6 student focus groups (engaged, disengaged, and underrepresented groups)
- Officer and staff interviews
- University stakeholder conversations
- Discussions at Student Council
- Input from representatives attending the Class Rep Conference
- Desk review of governance documents, officer roles, and sector-leading models
- Special focus on the Leeds Beckett SU community organising approach

Key Findings

The review uncovered a consistent pattern of:

- **Real connection to and advocation of the SU by those involved** in the representation and campaign work of the SU.
- **Low visibility** of democratic structures, especially outside Welcome Week and elections
- **Fragmented Class Rep systems**, with little consistency or institutional ownership
- **A Student Council model** viewed as exclusive, overly formal, and disconnected from real change
- **Underpowered Forums**, valued for peer support but lacking formal recognition or influence
- **Elections perceived as cliquey**, with limited preparation support and timing clashes with academic deadlines
- A broken feedback loop, where students provide input but rarely see outcomes or responses
- Limited access for TNE students, raising critical questions about equity, visibility, and funding

Despite this, students value the idea of representation and want the Students' Union to be more impactful. Their message was clear: the Students' Union must become simpler, more transparent, more relational, and digitally enabled.

Strategic Shifts

The report proposes a fundamental transformation of the Students' Union 's democratic model, grounded in:

- **Community Organising**: Moving from passive representation to relationshipbased engagement
- **Structural Simplification**: Streamlining committees and roles into more transparent and accountable formats
- **Digital Integration**: Introducing a real-time feedback platform to track student voice across Schools and campuses
- **Equity for All Students**: Addressing systemic underrepresentation, including for postgraduates, international students, and those on transnational programmes

Strategic Alignment

This review directly supports the Students' Union 2025-2028 Strategic Plan by delivering a clearer, more inclusive and impactful representation model. It aligns with the Students' Union 's strategic pillars to **Represent** students more visibly and effectively. **Empower** communities to lead change and **Support** sustainable systems of engagement. The recommendations in this report are designed to realise key aims in the Unions strategic plan, especially those related to governance reform, digital feedback, community engagement and student leadership development.

Headline Reforms

- 1. Create a **Student Assembly** to replace Council, focused on deliberation, scrutiny, and campaigns
- 2. Establish a **Student Executive Committee** as the operational leadership body, chaired by the President
- 3. Reform the Full-Time Officer team from five to four roles, with clusters agreed by December 2025
- 4. Reform the Class Rep system through a joint SU–University task & finish group
- 5. Recognise **Student Communities** (distinct from student groups) with voting rights and Convenors
- 6. Embed a **Community Organising model** to train leaders in mobilisation and relational leadership
- 7. Reform elections to improve candidate support, access, and legitimacy
- 8. Digitise the feedback loop via a SIMON-style platform for reps and students
- 9. Make representation of TNE students a strategic and resourced priority
- 10. Embed a transparent democratic framework showing how decisions are made
- 11. Build a Student Voice Log and Escalation System ("Loop")
- 12. Launch a **Digital Voice Hub** to close the feedback loop visibly
- 13. Reform the Annual Members' Meeting to focus on impact and celebration
- 14. Pilot paid or credited opportunities for rep and community leadership
- 15. Introduce a **Comprehensive Development Offer** for reps and student leaders

Implementation Roadmap

The report proposes a phased approach to implementation:

- **Short Term (0–6 months)**: Launch Assembly pilot, clarify TNE funding, introduce Rep visibility, confirm officer structure
- **Medium Term (6–12 months)**: Establish Executive Committee, pilot degreebased Reps, launch feedback platform
- Long Term (12+ months): Formalise Communities, publish Representation Handbook, embed sustainability, conduct governance review

Overall

This review represents a unique opportunity for the Students' Union to reimagine its democratic culture. Students are asking not for more forms, motions, or formality—but for **clarity, inclusion, community, and action**. With the reforms set out in this report, the Students' Union can rebuild trust and deliver a model of student democracy that is **relational, representative, and resilient**.

2. Introduction

Student democracy should be a source of power, pride, and purpose. It should be visible, inclusive, and alive in the daily lives of those it serves.

This report sets out a new vision for student representation and democratic engagement at Aberdeen University Students' Union (the Students' Union). It asks a bold and urgent question: Is the Students' Union's democracy fit for the students of today and tomorrow?

We propose a unified language where all student-led engagement is categorised under two core headings: **'student communities'** and **'student groups'**. This not only simplifies communication and access, but helps every student see where they belong and how they influence decision-making.

The creation of a new Student Assembly and a coordinating Student Executive are central structural shifts introduced in this review, alongside a move away from formal motions to a more accessible, campaign-led model of change.

This follows a comprehensive four-month review of the Students' Union's democratic structures, driven by long-standing concerns around visibility, impact, inclusion, and participation. These concerns were not isolated—they were echoed by students, staff, officers, and university stakeholders alike.

The Students' Union represents a diverse, global student community. Its members include undergraduates, postgraduates, mature learners, online students, and those studying at the University's transnational campuses. The current representation model—designed in a different time—has not kept pace with how students live, learn, and lead today.

The review found that students still believe in representation. They care about fairness, belonging, and being heard. But they are not connecting with the Students' Union 's existing democratic structures. Many find them too formal, too hidden, or too hard to navigate.

In response, this report proposes a shift from **hierarchies to communities**, from **structures to relationships**, and from **static governance to flexible, student-led action**.

The review was conducted by **Coole Insight Ltd**, a leading student movement consultancy with experience supporting over 50 students' unions across the UK. The project team was led by **Scott Farmer (Deputy Director)** with support from **Molly Purcell (Democracy & Governance Specialist)**, and further analysis and engagement delivered by Coole Insight's research associates, including **Dr Tom Ritchie**, **Beth Garrett**, and **Jack Medlin**.

The recommendations outlined here are not minor adjustments. They are a strategic reset—rooted in community organising, driven by digital engagement, and shaped by students' lived experience.

This report is for every student who has ever asked:

"What does the SU actually do?" "Who represents me?" "How do I make a difference here?"

It is also a roadmap for the Students' Union 's officers, staff, trustees, and institutional partners—offering a bold, practical, and future-facing approach to student democracy at Aberdeen.

3. Methodology

The review was designed to maximise participation across all levels of the Students' Union 's democratic ecosystem while ensuring insight from students who are typically underrepresented in formal structures. The methodology followed a five-phase approach, with timelines adapted to accommodate other priorities within the Students' Union 's operational calendar:

Phase 1: Project Initiation and Desk Research (December 2024)

- Clarification of aims and deliverables with the Students' Union stakeholders
- Review of the Students' Union 's existing constitutional documents, committee minutes, structures, and engagement data
- Mapping of current officer roles, council structures, and representative frameworks

Phase 2: Student and Stakeholder Engagement (January-April 2025)

- Online survey co-designed with the Students' Union and promoted to the full student body (over 6001 responses)
- In-person and online focus groups with class reps, council members, postgraduates, non-engaged students, and liberation group members
- One-to-one interviews with the Students' Union staff, sabbatical officers, and university senior stakeholders
- Use of structured prompts, Padlet boards, and open feedback channels to support asynchronous engagement

Phase 3: Data Analysis (February and April 2025)

- Thematic analysis of qualitative data using transcripts from Otter.ai and handwritten notes
- Quantitative analysis of survey results, including key demographic breakdowns and engagement trends
- Cross-validation of findings across focus group and interview data to triangulate insight

Phase 4: Drafting of Findings and Feedback Loop (April 2025)

- Consolidation of early recommendations
- Testing emerging themes with internal stakeholders and refining framing

¹ 600+ responses include both complete and partial submissions

Phase 5: Report Writing and Finalisation (April–May 2025)

- Submission of full draft findings and a final report
- Development of implementation prompts and next-step tools to support decisions by the Students' Union 's Board and Council

This methodology aligns with Coole Insight's principles of honesty, humanity, transparency, intention, collectivism, and kindness, and foregrounds both equity and clarity in student voice work.

4. Context and Background

Aberdeen University Students' Union (the Students' Union) is the recognised representative body for over 19,000 students at the University of Aberdeen. It is a registered Scottish charity (No. SC037971), governed by a Board of Trustees, and supported by a team of professional staff and elected officers. As a core part of the institution's academic and civic life, the Students' Union exists to empower, represent, and support students—ensuring their voices shape both the student experience and wider societal change.

The Students' Union 's representative structures includes:

- Five full-time elected Student Officers (President, VP Education, VP Welfare, VP Activities, VP Communities)
- A Student Council, responsible for scrutiny and debate on policy and officer activity
- A network of Class Representatives and School Conveners, representing students at programme and school level
- Liberation and Section Forums, supporting self-identifying student communities
- Participation in over 60 University-level committees, including University Court, Senate, Undergraduate Education Committee, Student Support & Experience Committee, Equality, Diversity & Inclusion Committee, and strategic project boards

The Union delivers services across:

- Academic representation, including the recruitment, training and support of Class Reps and School Conveners
- Campaigning and policy development, enabling students to advocate for change within the University and beyond
- Advice and wellbeing, including specialist support through the Students' Union Advice service
- Activities and community building, including over 200 student societies, over 60 sports clubs, and multiple volunteering, fundraising, and community engagement projects

This review was commissioned in response to several converging factors:

• Shifts in student behaviour and expectation since the pandemic, with reduced appetite for traditional forms of committee-based democracy

- Increased diversity in the student population, with a growing number of international and postgraduate students seeking new forms of representation and engagement
- Operational inconsistency in key areas such as the Class Rep system, Student Council, and Forum engagement, noted by both internal staff and students
- Strategic ambition within the Students' Union 's 2025–2028 Strategy to improve representation, visibility, and impact

The University itself is a large and complex institution, with the Students' Union expected to engage across multiple levels and remits. As the Union continues to deliver against its 2040 Vision and its core strategic pillars of Represent, Empower, and Support, this review aimed to ensure that:

- The current democratic structure enables and reflects the Students' Union 's charitable purpose
- Representation is visible, inclusive, and accessible to all students, including those on non-traditional pathways
- Democratic activity links clearly to decision-making power—both within the Union and at institutional level
- the Students' Union 's formal structures are fit for a modern and participatory culture of student leadership

This is not a review of governance in isolation. It is a review of culture, access, trust, and visibility. The findings and recommendations that follow are rooted in lived student and staff experience, comparative best practice, and the Students' Union 's strategic commitment to ensuring that every student can shape their education and experience.

5. Headline Findings

This section outlines the overarching insights that emerged from the review and captures systemic strengths and weaknesses that cut across the Students' Union 's democracy and representation structures. It blends lived experiences, structural analysis, and observed behaviours from a diverse and mixed-method engagement process.

1. Students Value Representation but Struggle to See It in Practice

The concept of representation remains important to most students at Aberdeen. The majority report moderate to high trust in the idea of a students' union and believe that the Students' Union has at least some power to influence university decisions, policy, and student life. However, the reality of how and where that influence happens is unclear.

Many students do not associate the Students' Union with policy, lobbying, or academic change—instead viewing it as an events and societies organisation. Those who are aware of structures like Student Council, Class Reps, or Forums often describe them as "unclear," "invisible," or "not for me."

"I don't really know what I'm voting for, but I always do it. Someone just asks me in the library."

—UG Student, Focus Group

"I feel more accountable to the general student body than to Council."

— Sabbatical Officer, 121 Interview

"We're seen as a club that runs events—not as a serious voice in academic decisions." — Students' Union Staff Member

"There's perception students don't know who they are or what they're for."

— University Stakeholder

2. Democratic Engagement is Limited by Confidence, Clarity, and Time

Students face three core barriers to meaningful democratic engagement:

- **Time:** Class and work schedules, particularly among postgraduates and students with caring responsibilities, limit availability.
- **Confidence:** Many students feel underqualified or intimidated, especially international and PGT students unfamiliar with UK models.

• **Clarity:** There is widespread confusion about how the Students' Union structures work, how to get involved, or how to influence change.

"I'd love to get involved, but I don't know where to start, and I don't want to embarrass myself."

— PGT Student, Focus Group

"There's just not enough time to do this properly when you have a job, lectures and a life."

- Survey Respondent

3. The Class Rep System is Disconnected, Inconsistent, and Often Invisible

The Class Rep system is foundational but fails to operate consistently across the University. Students frequently don't know who their rep is, and reps often feel unsupported or undertrained. Staff also describe major gaps in visibility and handover.

Key issues include:

- Lack of a centralised, visible list of Reps per course
- No shared expectations or training standard
- Variable School engagement and support
- No formal feedback systems or tracking tools
- Weak handover processes between Reps

"I found out my class had a Rep from a friend in another module. I'd never heard their name in class."

— Focus Group Participant

"There is no Class Rep system. There are 12 different ones."

Officer Interview

"Some Schools invest in reps, others don't. That's the problem."

— University Staff Member

"There's no platform. It's just emails or word of mouth."

— Focus Group Participant

"When reps change every year, nothing gets followed through."

— Students' Union Staff Member

4. Student Council is Both Valued and Alienating

While some see value in Council as a policy space, many students describe it as overly formal, hard to understand, and exclusive in tone and format. There is little transparency or opportunity to engage unless already "in the know."

"I sat in once, but I didn't understand half the language they used." — International Student

"Council feels like theatre. You perform, then go back to your real work." — Former Officer

"Representation shouldn't be a mystery – if you say 'students are telling us,' show us how."

— University Staff Member

5. Forums and Liberation Work Are Undervalued and Under-Resourced

Forums and identity-based groups provide peer support but often lack recognition, or clear links to policy and decision-making.

"Forums are a way into community, not an outcome of power."

— Officer Interview

"Liberation work only happens if an officer decides to care about it. That's not sustainable."

— Focus Group Participant

6. Elections Are Undermined by Process Confusion and Timing

Many students vote but don't understand who or what they're voting for. Elections are dominated by personal networks, last-minute manifestos, and timing that clashes with coursework.

"It felt like a popularity contest. I don't think I even read a manifesto."

- Survey Respondent

"If you're not already involved, you don't know when it's happening."

— Focus Group Participant

7. Students Want Micro-Engagement and Flexibility

Students want to engage in ways that fit around their schedules and confidence levels. They suggest:

- Anonymous feedback forms
- App-based consultation tools
- Opt-in involvement like quick polls and surveys
- Clear updates on what happens as a result

"If you want me to care, let me engage on my terms. Not yours." — Survey Respondent

"The suggestion box is good—but only if something happens with it." — Focus Group Participant

8. Students Want Visibility, Digital Access, and Sustainable Systems

Students are clear: without systems that survive officer turnover and support real-time tracking, nothing will change.

"If I could log it like a helpdesk ticket, I'd actually use it."

— UG Focus Group Participant

"Everything disappears with officer turnover. We need a record, a system." — PGT Focus Group Participant

This highlights the urgent need for a digitised feedback system and longer-term planning for representation sustainability.

9. Transnational Education Students Are Invisible in Representation Structures

The Students' Union is expected to represent students on transnational campuses most notably in Qatar—yet lacks the funding, staffing, or mechanisms to do so. These students are enrolled at Aberdeen but have no equivalent student voice infrastructure, democratic access, or campaign pathway.

"It's not even about being equal. It's about being visible. Right now, we're not." — TNE Student Feedback

"The University expects the Students' Union to serve these students, but without resources." — Officer Interview

"The Students' Union has a duty to these students, but we're not funded to do it." — Staff Interview

This raises strategic questions for the University:

- What is the Students' Union funded to do?
- What expectations exist for TNE delivery?
- How is TNE student voice captured, resourced, and escalated?

This issue is central to the equity of the Students' Union 's democratic mission.

What This Tells Us

These findings reveal that while the Students' Union 's democratic structures exist and function on paper, they are not consistently visible, understood, or trusted by the broader student population. Students are not disengaged due to apathy or disinterest—but because the systems available to them feel unclear, inaccessible, or disconnected from their everyday experience.

The issues are not primarily about *legitimacy*—they are about *legibility*. Representation at the Students' Union currently requires too much prior knowledge, confidence, or social capital. The most engaged students tend to be those already active in societies, academic networks, or pre-existing peer groups, leaving many marginalised students outside the process entirely.

Several recurring issues span the student journey:

- Students are not clearly told who represents them, what they do, or how to influence them.
- When students do provide feedback, they rarely see what happens as a result.
- Officers and Reps operate in fragmented systems, often unsupported by digital tools or consistent structures.
- Elections feel competitive but not inclusive; visible, but not always meaningful.

Simultaneously, there is *hope and belief* in the potential of student representation. Most students who participated in the review expressed that the SU *should* be a powerful platform for student voice—they just didn't feel connected to it yet.

The key opportunities now are to:

- Shift from representative structures to student communities that students relate to
- Build leadership pipelines that are open, values-driven, and developmental
- Digitise systems to improve visibility, tracking, and feedback

• Create a democratic culture where participation can happen informally, asynchronously, and on students' terms

With the right investment in simplicity, transparency, and community-rooted engagement, the Students' Union has the potential to re-emerge as a modern and trusted representative organisation—one that not only advocates on behalf of students, but *with* them, every step of the way.

6. THEMATIC ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

This section deepens the insights identified in Section 4 by analysing six key themes that emerged across survey responses, focus groups, officer/staff interviews, and stakeholder reflections. These themes underpin the recommendations made in Section 6 and show the need for both structural and cultural reform.

1. Representation, Visibility, and Trust

Despite broad belief in the importance of student representation, most students are unable to describe how the Students' Union operates, how decisions are made, or how to access those in representative roles. the Students' Union is more commonly associated with social events and the café than with campaigns or academic advocacy.

Students repeatedly asked for:

- A clearer explanation of who the SU is and what it does
- Ongoing updates, not just during elections or Welcome Week
- A culture of presence: Officers and Reps who are visible in lecture halls, group chats, and online platforms

"We're seen as a club that runs events—not as a serious voice in academic decisions." — Students' Union Staff Member

"Unless you're in a society or know someone, you won't hear about any of it." — Survey Respondent

There is a strong desire for **relatable**, **humanised communication**—officers and reps talking like students, not bureaucrats.

2. Class Rep System Inconsistency

The Class Rep system is widely supported in principle but poorly executed in practice. There is no university-wide framework or digital tool to support reps. While some Schools provide structure, most do not. Students often do not know who their Rep is or what they can do.

Key weaknesses include:

- No consistent method of Rep recruitment or announcement
- No shared training, templates, or escalation route
- No feedback platform to log or track progress
- Little to no handover between years, making the system fragile

"There is no Class Rep system. There are 12 different ones." — Officer Interview "We just guess. There's no guidance on what we're supposed to do." — Class Rep, FG1 "When someone graduates, it's like their rep year never happened." — School Convenor

A consistent theme across interviews and workshops was the need for a **standardised but flexible structure**, supported by technology, visible in course handbooks, and owned jointly by the Students' Union and the University.

3. Student Council and the Need for a Student Assembly

The Student Council format is widely perceived as outdated, intimidating, and exclusive in language and style. While those involved see value in scrutiny and motion debate, most students see it as inaccessible and symbolic rather than action oriented.

Feedback from students included:

- Council language is "like Parliament," making it hard to follow
- Students outside Council don't know when or how to get involved
- Motions are seen as disconnected from the campaigns that follow

"Council feels like theatre. You perform, then go back to your real work." — Former Officer

"I sat in once. I didn't understand half the language they used." — International Student

Students preferred **open**, **informal spaces** with:

- Options for breakout discussions and listening exercises
- Opportunities to propose issues without writing motions
- Voting mechanisms that feel participatory, not performative

The proposed Student Assembly would allow this shift—providing structure for decisions, but space for creativity, policy development, and inclusion.

4. Forums and the Case for Student Communities

Forums are appreciated by students who engage with them, especially as spaces for identity and peer support. However, their current design limits impact. Many are inconsistent in attendance, under-resourced, and lack formal status in decision-making.

Students and officers described:

- Forums running only when a passionate officer supports them
- Confusion about what Forums can "do" beyond discussion
- A disconnect between Forums and Council/Campaigning

[#]Liberation work only happens if an officer decides to care about it." — Focus Group Participant

"Forums are a way into community, not an outcome of power." — Officer Interview

Students want the SU to:

- Recognise structured Student Communities with elected leaders
- Allocate resources, budget, and staff/Officer support
- Grant Student Assembly voting rights to those communities
- Treat them as representative structures, not just activity groups

5. Elections and the Need for Equitable Candidacy

Election turnout is relatively high, but the culture surrounding elections was repeatedly described as exclusive, last-minute, and "for insiders." Many students vote based on friendship rather than policy, and candidates often stand without fully understanding the role.

Key concerns included:

- Lack of early info on roles, dates, or expectations
- Poor visibility of manifestos (often released late or in long text)
- Limited accessibility for international, PGT, and part-time students
- A sense that elections reward confidence and existing networks, not ideas

"Elections feel like a closed circle. You run if you already know someone who's done it."

— Officer Interview

"I would have run, but I didn't see it advertised until it was too late." — PGT Focus Group Participant

Students requested:

- "Why Run?" workshops and peer mentoring
- Election buddies for marginalised groups
- Role clarity well in advance
- Visual manifestos and candidate interviews across platforms
- Campaign rules that reduce over-reliance on social popularity

6. Feedback Loops, Digital Access, and Sustainable Systems

The absence of structured feedback loops was one of the most common frustrations. Students describe submitting feedback with no follow-up, and Reps often don't know what's been actioned or closed. "I filled in feedback forms but never heard anything again." — Survey Respondent "If there was an app or dashboard, it'd be easier to chase." — School Rep, FG1 "Everything disappears with officer turnover. We need a record, a system." — PGT Rep, OFG2

Students clearly want a **real-time digital platform** that allows:

- Logging of concerns by reps and students
- Status tracking and resolution timelines
- Aggregated visibility for Officers and staff
- Public dashboards for "You Said, We Did" outcomes

This is essential for building **trust**, **continuity**, **and transparency**—especially in a Union where officers and reps change annually.

7. Feedback Loops and the Case for Digitisation

Reps and students described an urgent need for digital platforms that make feedback visible, accountable, and sustainable.

"I'd love to know what actually happened after I spoke up. But I never do." — UG Focus Group Participant

"If we had a system that shows what's raised, who's actioning it, and what's changed, it would build trust." — PGT Focus Group Participant

A SIMON-style platform would:

- Allow students and reps to track issues across time and campuses
- Help staff and Officers spot recurring themes
- Improve handover and reduce duplication
- Close the loop on "you said, we did" by default

8. Representation for TNE Students

There is no current structure that allows TNE students to raise issues or participate in the Students' Union democracy. The issue is not about geography—it's about resourcing and political will.

"We're in Aberdeen in name only. There's no student voice here." — Qatar-based student, Feedback Interview

"I can't run, I can't vote, and I don't get asked anything." — TNE Student Comment

Students and staff supported:

- Clarity from the University on what is expected and funded
- The creation of a TNE Rep or Officer role
- Online democratic access to elections, Assembly, and Exec

This is not just an operational challenge. It's a constitutional and strategic one.

7. Recommendations and Options for Reform

This section outlines the key strategic and structural changes proposed to improve the democratic health, visibility, and accessibility of Aberdeen University Students' Union (the Students' Union). These recommendations are grounded in extensive engagement with students, officers, staff, and stakeholders and aim to simplify, modernise, and strengthen the Students' Union's democratic ecosystem.

The recommendations in this report are grouped into three categories:

- A. Student Voice Foundations
- B. Governance Structure
- C. Tools, Access and Continuity

Together, these recommendations represent a phased, practical transformation of the Students' Union's democratic and representative systems.

At the heart of this transformation is a strategic shift toward a Community Organising model.

What Is Community Organising?

Community organising is a method of empowering people to act together in pursuit of the issues that matter to them. It focuses on building relationships, developing leaders, surfacing shared concerns, and enabling collective action. It is based on the belief that power should be held by communities, not just institutions or individuals with formal authority.

This model is not about abandoning elections or committees, but about grounding democracy in lived experience, mutual accountability, and everyday leadership.

The Five Steps to Social Change (Citizens UK)

The Students' Union will use the five-step community organising cycle developed by Citizens UK to structure its democratic and representative practice:

- **Organise** Build communities based on shared identity, experience, or goals (e.g. academic schools, cultural groups, liberation identities).
- **Listen** Facilitate structured listening campaigns and 1:1s to surface what students care about.
- **Plan** Identify shared priorities, agree on achievable goals, and design strategies.

- **Act** Take collective action through campaigns, events, and advocacy.
- **Negotiate** Work with institutional partners, decision-makers, and the wider university community to secure meaningful change.

This cycle ensures that representation is active, inclusive, and focused on impact. It replaces passivity with participation, and tokenism with real agency.

These five steps provide a consistent logic across all the structures proposed in this report — from School Reps to Societies Panels to the new Student Assembly. They also shape how officers and staff will support students: not by doing for them, but by doing with them.

The rest of this section sets out how this model applies across each level of the Union's structures.

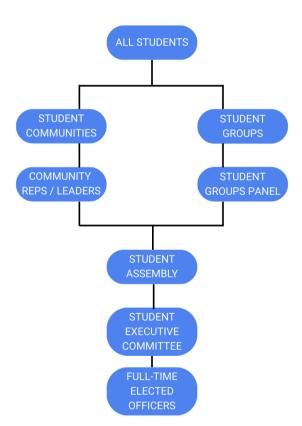


Figure 1: Proposed Democratic Structure of the Students' Union. Communities, Groups, Assembly, Executive and Full-time Elected Officers.

PART A – Student Voice Foundations

Overview

This section outlines the core student voice structures that form the foundation of the Students' Union's new democratic model. Each recommendation strengthens a different tier of representation — from the classroom to the campus community — enabling more students to participate, be heard, and lead change. At the heart of this approach is clarity: who represents who, how decisions are made, and how students can shape what happens.

A1. Adopt Community Organising as the Students' Union's Core Representation Model

Embed the five-step model of listen, organise, plan, act, and negotiate as the foundation of how the Union supports students to build power and lead change.

A2. Establish 'Student Communities' as the Primary Units of Representation

Replace or integrate current identity, interest, and issue-based groups into a structured Student Communities model that has formal rights and roles.

A3. Prioritise Reform of the Class Representative System

Standardise recruitment, training, visibility, and feedback processes to create a consistent and effective Class Rep system.

A4. Establish and Communicate a Transparent Democratic Framework

Clarify and visualise the tiers of decision-making — from referenda to executive — and ensure all roles are understood and aligned.

A1. Adopt Community Organising as the Students' Union's Core Representation Model

Recommendation

The Students' Union should adopt Community Organising as its core model for democratic engagement, representation, and student voice. This approach moves beyond representation through formal roles alone, focusing instead on building power and leadership within student communities.

What this means

Community Organising is based on five interlinked stages (Citizens UK):

- 1. **Organise** Form and support student communities built on shared identity, experience, or goals.
- 2. **Listen** Run structured campaigns (e.g. one-to-ones, forums, digital surveys) to surface shared priorities.
- 3. **Plan** Enable students to prioritise winnable issues, identify stakeholders, and develop strategy.
- 4. **Act** Support collective action through events, lobbying, campaigns, and cultural expression.
- 5. **Negotiate** Train student leaders to influence university and external decision-makers effectively.

This model transforms representation from a passive system of attendance into an active system of participation, accountability, and impact.

How it will work

- Community Organising becomes the core framework across all Union engagement including representation, campaigning, student groups, officer activity, and staff facilitation.
- It shapes how reps are trained, how student voice is gathered, and how change is pursued.
- Officers and staff become facilitators and capacity-builders, not just deliverers.
- Union priorities emerge through structured listening, not only manifestos or bureaucratic motions disappear.

Intended outcomes

- Increased participation by underrepresented and previously disengaged groups.
- Stronger mandates for officers and community leaders.
- Tangible change linked to student priorities.
- Enhanced leadership pipelines and progression routes.

Suggested Implementation

- **Phase 1 (2025):** Deliver training to officers, staff, and current reps in the five-step model.
- **Phase 2 (2025–26):** Embed the model in campaign planning, forums, rep systems, and officer workplans.
- **Phase 3 (2026 onwards):** Review outcomes annually and publish wins linked to student-led action.

A2. Establish 'Student Communities' as the Primary Units of Representation

Recommendation

The Students' Union should establish **Student Communities** as the foundational building blocks of its democratic structure. These communities should be based on shared identity, lived experience, or academic environment and empowered to lead, shape, and influence the Union's direction.

What This Means

Representation begins with belonging. Student Communities create spaces where individuals feel seen, heard, and supported — enabling them to identify issues, build power, and act collectively.

This recommendation replaces siloed or overlapping forums with a structured, flexible approach to **community-based organising**. It allows the Students' Union to centre voices from liberation groups, cultural networks, academic Schools, and underrepresented cohorts (e.g. international students, commuters, postgraduates).

How It Will Work

- Communities may include (but are not limited to):
 - Liberation-based groups (e.g. LGBTQ+, Disabled, Women, BAME students)
 - Academic Schools (e.g. School of Engineering, School of Law)
 - **Cultural or identity groups** (e.g. international students, mature students)
 - o Interest-based networks (e.g. student carers, distance learners)
- Each Community will:
 - Elect or appoint **Community Leaders** or small leadership teams
 - o Host regular listening spaces to identify shared priorities
 - Feed directly into a new **Student Assembly** and relevant officer portfolios
 - o Be supported by designated Union staff and officers
- Communities will be **open**, **inclusive**, **and flexible**: students can belong to more than one community, and new ones can be created based on emerging needs.

Intended Outcomes

- Greater democratic inclusion of underrepresented student voices
- Clearer pathways for students to raise concerns, propose change, and access support
- Stronger officer mandates built from community-informed priorities
- A shift from tokenistic consultation to deep, relational engagement

Suggested Implementation

- **2025**: Map current student networks and identify gaps. Begin informal convenings and consultations.
- **Autumn 2025**: Pilot 4–6 Communities with Community Leaders and structured listening.
- **2026**: Launch full Community structure, linked formally to a Student Assembly and Executive Committee. Provide convenors with leadership training and support.

A3. Prioritise Reform of the Class Representative System

Recommendation

The Students' Union should transform the existing Class Representative system into a **cluster-based, standardised academic network**, grouped by Schools, and co-owned with the University. This reform is essential to create consistency, visibility, and impact — and is the **single most important priority for implementation** emerging from this review.

What This Means

The Class Representative system underpins the entire academic representation model at Aberdeen. However, evidence from focus groups, surveys, and stakeholder interviews consistently shows it is **fragmented**, **inconsistently delivered**, **and poorly understood** by both students and staff.

Numerous parallel systems exist across Schools with limited co-ordination or ownership by the Students' Union. If left unaddressed, this **systemic inconsistency will continue to undermine wider democratic reform efforts** and limit the Union's ability to represent all academic voices fairly and equitably.

Reforming the system is essential to restore trust, enhance participation, and **strengthen the credibility of broader representation structures**.

How It Will Work

- Class Reps will be organised into **School-level clusters**, forming communities of practice and peer support.
- Each cluster will:
 - Hold structured conversations to identify and escalate shared issues
 - Nominate a Cluster Representative or co-leads to liaise with staff and officers
 - Connect directly into the **Student Assembly** and institutional forums
 - Use a shared digital platform for updates, issue tracking, and visibility
- Reform will also include:
 - A **standardised recruitment and induction process** across all Schools
 - Consistent training frameworks, with specific attention to PG and international students
 - A unified **digital identity and toolkit** for Reps
 - Co-ordination with academic staff to ensure local relevance while maintaining institutional consistency
 - A dedicated **Joint SU–University Task & Finish Group** to oversee design, delivery, and accountability of the reform
- Reps will be supported to operate not just as feedback channels, but as **academic organisers**, empowered through the five steps of community organising: *Organise, Listen, Plan, Act, Negotiate*.

Intended Outcomes

- A clear and consistent rep system across the institution
- Greater retention, motivation, and impact among reps
- Strengthened student voice within teaching and learning structures
- Stronger partnerships between students, the Union, and the University on academic quality
- Integration of academic concerns into wider democratic strategy

Suggested Implementation

- **Spring 2025**: Establish the **Joint SU–University Task & Finish Group** with representation from Schools, Union staff, officers, current reps, and University academic leads
- Autumn 2025: Pilot 2–3 School Clusters with revised recruitment, training, and reporting
- 2026: Roll out full system-wide reform, integrated into Assembly and officer portfolios
- **2026–27**: Evaluate effectiveness, including rep and staff feedback, and publish annual report on academic representation

A4. Establish and Communicate a Transparent Democratic Framework

Recommendation

The Students' Union should formally adopt and actively communicate a **tiered democratic structure** that shows how student voice flows through referenda, meetings, elected bodies, and officers. This framework will improve visibility, accountability, and trust in Union decision-making — and provide clarity for students, staff, and stakeholders.

What This Means

Many students — and even some staff and elected leaders — are unsure how democratic decisions are made in the Students' Union, or how different structures (like officers, reps, and campaigns) connect. Without a clear framework, participation suffers and confidence in Union leadership weakens.

This recommendation proposes a codified democratic ecosystem — a simple, visual structure that defines what each tier does, who's involved, and how students can influence outcomes. It creates a governance spine for the new model, bringing together the reforms from Sections A, B, and C into a single coherent system.

Embedding this framework in training, elections, and induction materials will ensure new leaders inherit a clear understanding of where they sit in the system and how they are expected to lead and listen.

How It Will Work

The democratic structure will be organised in five visible tiers, each with defined roles and responsibilities:

Level	Function
Referenda	Student-wide vote on constitutional change or major directional issues
•	Oversight and scrutiny of officer activity and campaign priorities
SLUGENL ASSEMBLY	Collaborative decision-making and priority-setting for campaigns and policy
Student executive	Coordination of campaigns, partnerships, and cross- community delivery
Full-time Elected Officers	Day-to-day strategic leadership, partnership working, and delivery

Additional features:

- Governance visualisation displayed clearly on SU website, in elections materials, and training
- Each tier aligned to community organising principles: listen, plan, act, negotiate, reflect
- Formal terms of reference for each tier developed and approved as part of new byelaws
- Staff teams aligned to support and steward each level of the system

Intended Outcomes

- Improved transparency and student trust in democratic processes
- A shared mental model across students, officers, and staff
- Greater accountability at each level of the democratic structure
- More effective succession planning and training for student leaders
- Integration of reforms across Sections A, B and C into a single cohesive system

Suggested Implementation

- Summer 2025: Design visual framework and supporting communications tools
- Autumn 2025: Launch framework in handbooks, websites, rep and officer inductions
- **Spring 2026**: Embed visual in elections materials and AMM documentation
- **2026–27**: Evaluate impact on participation, understanding, and cross-tier coordination

PART B – Governance Structures

Overview

This section outlines the structural reforms required to build a more effective, transparent, and accountable Students' Union. These recommendations replace outdated or unclear governance mechanisms with structures designed to reflect student diversity, support action, and enable scrutiny.

At the heart of this new model is a Deliberative Student Assembly that replaces Student Council as the primary forum for inclusive debate and priority setting. This is supported by a smaller, delivery-focused Executive Committee, a refined officer team aligned to academic clusters, and a Groups Panel to ensure sports and societies remain influential within the Union's decision-making.

Together, these proposals lay the foundation for a democratic ecosystem that is coordinated, representative, and designed to grow with the needs of Aberdeen's diverse student communities.

B1. Replace Student Council with a Deliberative Student Assembly

Create a more inclusive, transparent, and accessible forum for student debate, policy setting, and campaign priorities.

B2. Create a Student Executive Committee to Drive Union-Wide Delivery and Accountability

Establish a streamlined leadership body to implement Assembly mandates and coordinate activity across schools, communities, and campaigns.

B3. Reform the Full-Time Officer Model into a Streamlined, Purpose-Led Structure

Restructure the officer roles to ensure a clear representational focus and basis for supporting education, welfare and community organising.

B4. Establish a Groups Panel Linking Societies and Sports to Governance

Maintain a clear voice for student groups through an elected panel feeding into Assembly and Executive, ensuring visibility and influence without duplicating officer roles.

B1. Replace Student Council with a Deliberative Student Assembly

Recommendation

The Students' Union should replace the current Student Council with a new, more inclusive and deliberative **Student Assembly**. The Assembly will be the central space for student-led decision-making, setting priorities, and holding officers to account. It will be a highly visible, engaging forum grounded in accessibility and community organising.

What This Means

The current Student Council model is underused, poorly understood, and not reflective of the breadth of student experiences or voices. Engagement data shows low turnout, limited awareness, and weak links between Council discussions and wider Union activity. The traditional motion-based, rules-driven format has limited its accessibility and impact.

Replacing it with a **Student Assembly** creates a more welcoming, participatory space where issues surfaced through community organising (via listening campaigns and reps) can be shared, prioritised, and turned into action. The Assembly becomes the democratic centre of the Union — one where **power is shared**, **relationships are built**, **and decisions are driven by student voice**.

How It Will Work

• The Assembly will meet **three times per year**, with the following structure:

Meeting 1 (Autumn):

- Elect the **Student Assembly Chair** (a student, not an officer)
- Set the **Union's annual priorities**
- o Ratify campaign themes proposed by Student Communities

Meeting 2 (Spring):

- Review progress on Union priorities
- Hear new issues emerging from Student Communities, Groups, and School Reps

Meeting 3 (Late Spring):

- Hear updates on the **delivery of campaign outcomes**
- Elect the next Executive Committee
- All students may attend, but voting or formal roles are held by:
 - Elected officers
 - Student Communities 1 per community (from liberation, cultural, or academic groups)
 - Student Group Representatives
 - o School Cluster Leads
 - The current Executive Committee
- **The Executive Committee will act as the Steering Group** for the Assembly: preparing the agenda, responding to priorities, and supporting follow-up actions.

- Format and access:
 - Meetings will be **hybrid or digitally accessible**
 - Language will be **plain and inclusive**
 - Structure will favour **discussion**, **storytelling**, **and facilitation**, not formal debate
- Actions or mandates from the Assembly will be built into:
 - Officer workplans
 - Campaign calendars
 - Reports to Trustees and University partners

- A more participatory, relevant, and accessible democratic process
- Better integration of lived experience into SU strategy
- Clearer student-led priorities across all communities
- Greater visibility and legitimacy for SU decision-making
- A stronger culture of co-leadership and public accountability

- **Spring-Summer 2025**: Co-design format and roles with officers, reps, and students;
- Autumn 2025: Pilot first Student Assembly using new format
- **2026**: Embed full cycle of three meetings per academic year; transition from Council in byelaws
- **2026–27**: Evaluate attendance, engagement, diversity of participation, and delivery on outcomes

B2. Create a Student Executive Committee to Drive Union-Wide Delivery and Accountability

Recommendation

The Students' Union should **create a new Student Executive Committee** to connect officers, reps, and community leaders in a unified, strategic forum. This group will deliver on priorities agreed by the Student Assembly, ensure coordination across Schools and student groups, and provide visible leadership across the Union's work.

What This Means

There is currently **no coordinated leadership forum** that brings together different layers of student representation across the Union. As a result, campaigns, policies, and student priorities are often pursued in silos — limiting impact, accountability, and visibility.

Creating the **Student Executive Committee** will ensure the Students' Union has a **central leadership mechanism** rooted in collaboration, representation, and delivery. It becomes the space where Assembly priorities are translated into coordinated action, and where student leaders are empowered to lead together.

- The Executive Committee will meet **monthly**, chaired by the SU President.
- It will:
 - o Act as the steering group for the Student Assembly
 - Coordinate Union-wide delivery of campaigns, policies, and priorities
 - Oversee engagement across Schools, student groups, and liberation communities
 - Report termly to the Assembly and Annual Members' Meeting (AMM)
- The Committee will have **11 voting members**:
 - 4 Full-Time Sabbatical Officers
 - 1 School Representative
 - 1 Liberation Representative
 - 1 International Student Representative
 - **1 Postgraduate Representative** (covering both PGT and PGR)
 - 1 Student Groups Representative
 - 1 Student Assembly Chair
 - **1 TNE Student Representative** (if further recommendations adopted)
 - **1 Flexible Seats** for priority campaigns or emerging issues.
- Roles will be elected or nominated through transparent processes agreed with the Assembly. Flexibility in composition means **no byelaw changes are required** to adapt to future needs.
- Staff and officers will support delivery, planning, and documentation.
- Meetings will be action-focused with clearly defined outputs, accessible reporting, and links to officer workplans.

- Creation of a strong, visible, and inclusive student leadership forum
- Improved delivery of campaigns and priorities agreed by the student body
- Clearer coordination across student groups, academic clusters, and community structures
- More accountable and agile responses to key student issues
- Greater legitimacy in institutional negotiations and external representation

- **Summer 2025**: Finalise structure and membership approach with Assembly and officers
- **Autumn 2025**: Launch first Student Executive Committee alongside the Assembly pilot
- **2026**: Embed Executive as a standing body with formal status in Union democratic structures
- **2026–27**: Evaluate effectiveness and publish annual impact summary linked to Assembly priorities

B3. Reform the Full-Time Officer Model into a Streamlined, Purpose-Led Structure

Recommendation

The Students' Union should reduce its current five-role Full-Time Officer model into a streamlined, purpose-led structure: **1 President and 3 Vice Presidents**. This new model will prioritise representation, student support, and enabling collective action — while allowing space in 2025/26 to shape portfolios through genuine student and stakeholder input.

What This Means

The current five-role model — President, Education, Welfare, Activities, and Communities — lacks clarity, balance, and coherence. Officers often feel isolated or overloaded, and their roles straddle both representation and service delivery in ways that dilute their focus and sustainability.

This recommendation sets a clear direction of travel: the Union will reduce to a four-role model in 2026. This change acknowledges widespread feedback around **burnout**, **duplication**, **and siloed leadership**. It also reflects the shift toward community organising, where officers act as facilitators of student-led change — not service managers.

Rather than impose a rigid model now, the Union commits to co-designing the precise **Vice President portfolios during Term 1 of the 2025/26 academic year**. This process will ensure the roles are grounded in the Union's new representative structure, meaningful for students, and feasible within available resource.

- From 2026, the Full-Time Officer Team will consist of:
 - 1 **President** responsible for:
 - Acting as lead liaison with the University
 - Coordinating officer and Executive work
 - Championing governance and democracy
 - Representing issues that cut across clusters
 - **3 Vice Presidents**, whose final portfolios will be shaped through codesign but are likely to cover:
 - Education and representation
 - Welfare, community and belonging
 - Campaigning and enabling student organising

• Portfolio development process (Autumn 2025):

- o Co-design sessions with students, staff, reps and officers
- o Map representation priorities emerging from new governance structures
- o Align with student community organising and academic cluster logic
- Ensure support and workload alignment with SU staff structure

• Officers will focus on:

- Enabling reps and community leaders
- Facilitating campaigns and collective action
- o Navigating issues, not owning services
- o Connecting grassroots listening with SU-wide change

Model Evaluation and Rationale

The proposed structure was developed after careful evaluation of several alternative officer models:

Model	Overview	Limitations
		Officer silos, unmanageable workloads, inconsistent remits
Merged Roles Model		Risks vagueness of focus; needs strong staff support
	-	Adds clarity, but doesn't address role overload or academic focus
		Democratic, but can lead to unclear mandates and internal tension
Stripped-Back Model	4 Officers + Student Assembly Chair	Builds student leadership and accountability; integrates well with Assembly

Intended Outcomes

- Clearer, more coherent officer team
- Improved support for priority areas: education, welfare, organising
- Reduced duplication and more strategic focus
- Stronger alignment between officers, student communities, and reps
- A model shaped with not imposed on the student body

- Summer 2025: Communicate intention to move to 4-role model in 2026
- Autumn 2025: Run co-design process to define VP portfolios
- December 2025: Confirm structure in time for 2026 elections
- Spring 2026: Launch officer campaign guidance and deliver candidate briefing
- **2026–27**: Monitor effectiveness and review alignment with staff support and governance

B4. Establish a Groups Panel Linking Societies and Sports to Governance

Recommendation

The Students' Union should establish a **Groups Panel** as a formal democratic structure that brings together elected or nominated representatives from recognised **student societies and sports clubs**. This panel will provide a structured way for student groups to influence Union priorities, contribute to campaigns, and participate in governance.

What This Means

Student-led groups are one of the most visible and active aspects of student life, yet they have historically had limited structured involvement in democratic decisionmaking. The **Groups Panel ensures that Societies and Sports Clubs retain a clear and consistent voice** in shaping the Union's direction, even as officer structures evolve.

By formalising this route into governance, the Union recognises the vital role student groups play in **community building, peer leadership, and campaign engagement**, and ensures they are **empowered**, **not marginalised**, within the wider representational system.

- The Panel ensures that student groups continue to have **direct representation at the highest levels**, including:
 - A dedicated seat on the Executive Committee
 - Termly access to the **Student Assembly**
 - o Defined opportunities to shape Union priorities and campaign themes
- The Groups Panel will:
 - Meet termly (3x per year)
 - Elect a **Student Groups Representative** to sit on the Executive Committee
 - Contribute ideas to the **Student Assembly's campaign planning**
 - o Highlight shared opportunities and issues faced by student groups
 - Offer feedback on relevant SU strategies (e.g. funding, Welcome Week, society development)
- Membership will include one representative per:
 - Registered **Society**
 - Registered **Sports Club**
- Group reps will be elected by their members or nominated through their committee structures.
- Staff will support the Panel with convening, facilitation, and tracking outcomes, which will be reported to the Executive Committee.
- The Panel will **not include identity-based**, **academic**, **or issue-based groups**, as those are formalised as **Student Communities** within a separate structure and governance route.

- Clearer voice for societies and sports clubs in shaping Union-wide strategy
- Stronger link between student activity and SU governance
- More consistent communication and collaboration between groups and officers
- Recognition of the role student groups play in building community and leadership

- **Spring 2025**: Engage group committees to shape the panel remit and elect initial representatives
- **Autumn 2025**: Pilot termly panel meeting and elect Student Groups Representative to the Executive
- **2026**: Formalise Groups Panel in governance documents and align with funding/reporting cycles
- **2026–27**: Evaluate contribution to Union campaigns and visibility of group priorities in Assembly and Executive.

PART C – Tools, Access and Continuity

This section sets out the practical enablers needed to deliver and sustain a more democratic, accessible, and community-led Students' Union. These recommendations address the infrastructure, training, communication, and continuity mechanisms that underpin the shift to a community organising model. Each proposal strengthens the systems, skills, and visibility that ensure student voice is not only heard but acted upon — now and into the future.

C1. Embed Community Organising through Training and Development

Equip officers, reps, and staff with the mindset and methods to lead communitypowered change.

C2a. Build a Student Voice Log and Escalation System (Working Title: "Loop")

Create an internal platform to track student issues in real time and support structured representation.

C2b. Create a Digital Voice Hub to Share Updates and Close the Feedback Loop

Launch a student-facing online space to show how feedback leads to change — visibly and transparently.

C3a. Reform Election Access and Candidate Support

Make it easier and fairer for all students to stand, vote, and lead — with inclusive and developmental processes.

C3b. Reform the Annual Members' Meeting (AMM) Quorum and Format

Replace tick-box attendance with meaningful reflection, visibility, and celebration of student voice.

C4. Deliver Representation for Transnational Education (TNE) Students

Ensure students studying overseas — especially in Qatar — have access to meaningful and resourced representation.

C1. Deliver Training in Community Organising to Staff, Officers, and Reps

Recommendation

The Students' Union should embed **community organising training** across its student leadership and staff development programme. This will provide officers, reps, staff, and student leaders with the tools, mindset, and methods needed to enact the Union's new democratic model.

What This Means

Community organising is central to the Union's future. It is not just a method — it is a **cultural shift** that redefines leadership, accountability, and engagement. To be effective, this model must be **understood**, **practised**, **and championed** at all levels of the organisation.

Delivering structured training ensures that **students and staff share a common language and set of tools**. It prepares officers, reps, and Community Leaders to build relationships, surface issues, develop priorities, and take collective action — and it enables staff to support them with confidence and consistency.

Without training, the shift to a community organising model risks remaining aspirational. With it, the model becomes **embedded**, **sustainable**, **and transformative**.

- Training will be developed or sourced from recognised organising frameworks (e.g. Citizens UK) and aligned to the five steps to social change:
 - 1. Organise How to identify and build community groups
 - 2. Listen One-to-ones, story gathering, and relational mapping
 - 3. **Plan** Issue identification, power analysis, campaign planning
 - 4. **Act** Organising events, mobilising peers, and leading actions
 - 5. Negotiate Engaging with decision-makers and evaluating outcomes
- Training will be tailored for each key audience:
 - o **Officers**: induction, termly refreshers, and strategy co-design
 - **Community Leaders and Reps**: core modules delivered annually
 - **Staff**: professional development sessions, embedded in staff onboarding and CPD
- Training formats may include:
 - In-person and online workshops
 - Digital toolkits and playbooks
 - Peer learning circles
 - Role-based scenario sessions
- Where appropriate, the Union may partner with Citizens UK or similar organisations for support, inspiration, or accreditation.

- A shared understanding of the organising model across the Union
- More confident and capable officers, reps, and student leaders
- Staff equipped to support relational, student-led organising
- Stronger alignment between Union strategy and community priorities
- Clearer, more impactful campaign delivery

- Summer 2025: Audit existing training provision; define training needs by role
- Autumn 2025: Pilot introductory workshops for officers, reps, and key staff
- **Spring 2026**: Roll out full training offer; integrate into leadership development cycles
- **Ongoing**: Evaluate training impact through feedback and leadership effectiveness reviews

C2a. Build a Student Voice Log and Escalation System (Working Title: "Loop")

Recommendation

The Students' Union should implement a structured, real-time platform for logging, escalating, and analysing student feedback — a Student Voice Log and Escalation System, with the working title: "Loop". This internal system will enable student leaders and staff to coordinate representation effectively, maintain institutional memory, and identify priority issues across communities and Schools.

What This Means

Currently, the Union lacks a consistent method for tracking student issues raised by Class Reps, Community Leaders, and Officers. Without a shared platform, feedback can become siloed, duplicated, or lost across leadership transitions and changing committee structures.

"Loop" will act as the Union's internal feedback infrastructure, supporting the entire representational system — from day-to-day issue logging to campaign planning and strategic reporting. It complements the external-facing Digital Voice Hub (C2b) by powering the behind-the-scenes coordination that makes visibility possible.

It complements the cultural and external-facing work of the Digital Voice Hub (C2b), creating the backend logic needed to support community organising, campaign development, and transparency.

How It Will Work

- The system will allow:
 - **Reps and Community Leaders** to log issues by theme, school, or student group
 - **Tagging and categorisation** (e.g. cost of living, assessment feedback, placements)
 - o **Escalation pathways** to officers, staff, or university committees
 - Live tracking of issue progress and assigned actions
 - Data dashboards for trend analysis and priority identification
- Key features:
 - The system will ask three questions: what's going well, what's not going well, and what changes would you like to see.
 - Structured fields (drop-downs, status updates, themes, urgency)
 - o Shared login access for student staff, full-time officers, and support staff
 - Permissions model for reps at different levels (e.g. School Reps vs. Community Leaders)
 - Integration into Assembly and Executive planning cycles

Intended Outcomes

• A sustainable and professionalised approach to student voice tracking

- Early identification of cross-cutting issues and systemic problems
- Enhanced escalation support for reps and officers
- Stronger evidence base for campaign planning and reporting
- Increased continuity across academic years, officer terms, and leadership changes

- **Summer 2025**: Define system requirements with reps, staff, and officers
- Autumn 2025: Develop pilot in 2 Schools and 1 Community Group
- **2026**: Full rollout across all representation structures
- **2026–27**: Train incoming reps and staff; produce annual insight report to inform priorities

C2b. Create a Digital Voice Hub to Share Updates and Close the Feedback Loop

Recommendation

The Students' Union should launch a **Digital Voice Hub** — a student-facing online platform that enables all students to **see what issues have been raised, track progress, and view outcomes**. This visibility will help build trust in the Union's representational system and create a culture of transparent, accountable leadership.

What This Means

Students often report submitting feedback but **never hearing back**. This erodes trust in the Union's ability to act on concerns and undermines the credibility of reps, officers, and staff alike.

The Digital Voice Hub will act as a **public-facing companion to the internal tracking system** (C2a), surfacing selected issues and progress updates in a student-friendly, transparent format. It brings the feedback loop to life through engaging content, accessible reporting, and strong communication.

The goal is not just to inform — it is to **create a visible culture of "You Said, We Did... So What?"**, making impact measurable and democracy real.

- The Hub will present:
 - Key themes of student feedback currently being addressed
 - **Updates** on actions taken by the Union or the University
 - Infographics, dashboards, and timelines to show progress
 - **"You Said, We Did... So What?**" stories, updated regularly
 - Routes for students to submit issues or ideas and see if similar topics have already been raised
- Visibility will be ensured through:
 - Integration with **MyAberdeen**, the SU website, and Assembly updates
 - **Pop-up installations** during high-traffic weeks (e.g. Welcome, Elections, Exam Feedback)
 - Cross-posting through **social media and newsletters**
 - Digital signage where available
- Access and language will be prioritised:
 - Mobile-responsive design
 - Plain English
 - Visual-first communication
- The Digital Hub will be maintained by SU staff, with inputs from:
 - o Reps and Community Leaders
 - Officers
 - Assembly and Executive tracking

- Visible and credible student representation processes
- Increased trust in the Union and its impact
- Higher engagement in democratic structures
- Reps and officers recognised for their work
- Better understanding of how change happens and who is responsible

- **Summer 2025**: Co-design the Hub layout and voice with students and comms team
- Autumn 2025: Launch alongside Assembly and Feedback Campaign
- Spring 2026: Embed into elections, campaign updates, and MyAberdeen
- **Ongoing**: Update monthly, with annual "Voice Impact Report" to Assembly and AMM

C3a. Reform Election Access and Candidate Support

Recommendation

The Students' Union should redesign its election processes to be **more accessible**, **inclusive**, **and developmental**, with a focus on early engagement, community outreach, and candidate confidence-building. This reform should reduce barriers, diversify candidate pools, and align with the broader shift to community-led representation.

What This Means

Student elections at Aberdeen have historically been described as **cliquey**, **inaccessible**, **and unclear**. Candidates often stand without fully understanding the roles, and many students — particularly those from underrepresented or international backgrounds — do not engage at all.

If elections are to reflect the Union's organising model, they must become **entry points to leadership** — not gatekept rituals. The process should prioritise support, visibility, and value-based campaigning over popularity contests or procedural hurdles.

How It Will Work

- Key reforms should include:
 - **Early promotion** of elections and roles, including:
 - Role packs and guidance released at least 4 weeks in advance
 - Clear explanation of time commitments, expectations, and support available
 - "Why Run?" briefing events, targeting:
 - Marginalised groups, postgraduates, international students
 - Students involved in communities, societies, or informal leadership
 - Candidate Buddy Scheme:
 - Peer support for first-time or underrepresented candidates
 - Accessible campaigning options:
 - Short audio or video manifestos
 - Support to run community-led hustings
 - Templates, tools, and time-saving resources
 - Election timeline safeguards:
 - Avoid clashes with common assessment deadlines
 - Publicise campaign period and voting days clearly in advance
- Communications strategy to focus on:
 - o Demystifying the process and reducing fear of "getting it wrong"
 - Sharing success stories from past officers and candidates
 - Using student-led digital content and co-branded platforms

Intended Outcomes

- Broader, more diverse pool of candidates
- Increased engagement from new and marginalised communities

- Higher quality manifestos and more confident candidates
- Less reliance on cliques or popularity dynamics
- Elections that reflect the values of the community organising model

- **Autumn 2025**: Co-design election reforms with outgoing officers, SU staff, and marginalised student groups
- **December 2025**: Finalise and launch election pack and new candidate comms
- Spring 2026: Pilot revised process in the next full officer elections
- **2026–27**: Evaluate participation diversity, candidate satisfaction, and campaign quality

C3b. Reform the Annual Members' Meeting (AMM) Quorum and Format

Recommendation

The Students' Union should reform the Annual Members' Meeting (AMM) by **reducing the quorum requirement from 200 to 50 students** and repositioning the AMM as a **celebration of student voice, transparency, and impact**, rather than a box-ticking exercise.

What This Means

Currently, the AMM is treated primarily as a **compliance requirement**. The 200-student quorum has forced the Union to prioritise turnout through incentives and marketing, rather than focusing on meaningful discussion or reflection.

This undermines the Union's credibility and creates frustration for both students and staff. A lower quorum reflects **sector best practice** (including NUS guidance) and supports a shift toward **quality over quantity** in democratic engagement.

Reframing the AMM also offers a key opportunity to **showcase achievements**, **present data**, **and hear from students** on the Union's direction.

How It Will Work

- Constitutional change to lower quorum from 200 to 50 students
- Reframe the event as a space to:
 - Present Assembly priorities and outcomes
 - Launch the "Voice Impact Report"
 - Share **student-led campaign progress**
 - Hear questions from students and reflect on lessons learned
 - o Celebrate community organising, rep work, and officer leadership
- Format and tone:
 - Hybrid delivery for broader access
 - Hosted by a student (e.g. Student Assembly Chair)
 - Accessible language, visual storytelling, and interactive segments
 - No separate AGM with duplicate business
- Statutory items (e.g. trustee report, accounts) kept brief and student-facing
- Position the AMM as the **closing loop** in the democratic cycle:
 - \circ Assembly sets priorities \rightarrow Executive delivers \rightarrow AMM reflects

Intended Outcomes

- A more meaningful and engaging democratic event
- Increased transparency around Union performance and priorities
- Better use of staff time and resources
- Improved student trust and participation
- Clearer alignment with the community organising model

- **Autumn 2025**: Propose quorum change and format restructure to Board of Trustees
- **Spring 2026**: Launch new AMM format as the end-of-year democratic showcase
- **2026–27**: Build AMM into campaign reporting and Assembly handover cycles

C4. Deliver Representation for Transnational Education (TNE) Students

Recommendation

The Students' Union should make the **representation of Transnational Education (TNE) students** — particularly those based at the Qatar campus — a **strategic priority**, working with the University to clarify responsibilities, secure sustainable funding, and implement scalable representation models that reflect the Union's commitment to all its members.

What This Means

TNE students are enrolled at Aberdeen University but **lack access to the same representation structures** as their peers on the main campus. While the Union is sometimes asked to deliver work or support abroad, it currently has **no funding**, **infrastructure**, **or consistent strategy** for doing so.

This results in a democratic gap. Students at international campuses — especially in Qatar — face issues around education, welfare, and student voice without structured support or advocacy.

To uphold the principle that "our students are our students, wherever they are," the Union must formalise its approach to TNE representation and ensure it is **resourced**, **visible**, and **connected** to the Assembly and Executive structures.

- The Union should:
 - **Clarify its funded responsibilities** with the University for both domestic and international campuses
 - Develop a scalable model of representation for overseas cohorts (including digital engagement, staff liaison roles, and peer-to-peer channels)
 - Advocate for:
 - A part-time elected officer or representative role based within a TNE campus
 - A base-level student advice and representation service
 - **Formal pathways** for TNE student feedback to reach the Assembly and Executive
 - Integration of TNE student issues into campaign planning and reporting
- The Union should embed these expectations in:
 - Future international partnership agreements
 - Discussions on University global strategy and representation governance
 - Ongoing reviews of democratic systems and resourcing
- Opportunities for digital infrastructure (e.g. Loop and Voice Hub) should be leveraged to provide access and visibility for TNE students.

- Reduced democratic exclusion for TNE students
- Greater clarity around SU–University partnership boundaries
- A scalable, sustainable model for international student voice
- Improved Union credibility as a voice for **all Aberdeen students**
- Recognition of TNE student experiences within campaign and policy work

- **Summer 2025**: Begin University discussions on roles, funding, and representation expectations
- Autumn 2025: Pilot digital engagement mechanisms with Qatar cohort
- **Spring 2026**: Appoint a TNE student representative and introduce reporting pathways to Assembly
- **2026–27**: Develop long-term funding proposal for embedded TNE representation and advice support

C5. Introduce a Comprehensive Development Offer for Reps and Community Leaders

Recommendation

The Students' Union should create and embed a comprehensive development offer for all student representatives and leaders — including Class Reps, School Reps, Community Leaders, Campaign Leads, and Student Executive members. This offer should equip them with the skills, support, and structure to represent effectively, organise powerfully, and grow personally through their leadership roles

What This Means

Student leaders are central to the success of the Students' Union's new democratic model. Yet across the consultation, student reps and staff alike highlighted a lack of clarity, support, and consistency in how these leaders are trained, guided, and celebrated.

Many reps feel underprepared or isolated. Others receive ad hoc support or rely on local staff knowledge that disappears with turnover. Campaigners and Community Leaders often operate without formal development or reflection points. These issues weaken both the student experience and the credibility of democratic structures.

To change this, the Union should deliver a **clear**, **tiered**, **and relational development offer**, aligned with its values and the principles of community organising. This will ensure that every rep and leader is **not just appointed** — **but empowered**.

It will also establish visible pathways for students to **progress through the democratic ecosystem**, from a first-time Class Rep to a policy leader or Executive member, while embedding continuity, reflection, and recognition throughout.

How It Will Work

Structure and Components

1. Role-specific induction

- What the role is, what it's not, and how it fits in the democratic structure
- Introduced via a combination of:
 - Online welcome hub (short videos, case studies, expectations)
 - Live "Getting Started" sessions each semester
 - Peer-led discussion spaces with outgoing/postholder reps

2. Core Skills Curriculum

Delivered in modular form, available both synchronously and asynchronously:

- **Community organising fundamentals** (relational 1:1s, issue mapping, power analysis)
- **Communication skills** (public speaking, listening strategies, email + messaging)

- **Escalation pathways and decision-making** (how to use Loop, when to escalate, who does what)
- Digital campaigning and influence
- Meeting and committee navigation
- Equity and inclusive leadership

3. Micro-engagement Tools and Templates

- o Customisable feedback forms
- o "Rep-on-a-page" or "Community Leader One Sheet" templates
- "15-minute win" activity suggestions for low-time, high-impact engagement
- o Standardised agenda inserts for class reps or School forums
- Visibility templates for Instagram, TikTok, and student newsletters

4. Pathways and Progression

- Visual map of how student leaders can move between roles and develop
- Invitations to apply for project leads, working groups, and Union panels
- Shadowing and peer-learning opportunities across roles and campuses

5. **Recognition and Accreditation**

- Tiered digital badging for induction, core modules, advanced training
- Reference letters and LinkedIn endorsements for sustained contribution
- Awards or annual showcase of leadership outcomes (e.g. "Rep Impact of the Year")
- Option for co-accreditation with Citizens UK or sector partners

6. Staff Support Infrastructure

- Dedicated Rep and Leader Development Coordinator (if resourced)
- Integration into staff onboarding to ensure consistency of delivery
- Annual staff-student co-design sprint to evaluate and refresh content

Tiered Application

Tier	Roles	Development Offer
(ore		Induction + 3 core modules + micro- tools
Enhanced	School Reps, Community Leaders, Liberation Leads	Full curriculum access + project invites + peer support
Advanced		Mentorship, strategy coaching, co- facilitation of training

Intended Outcomes

- Confident, capable and consistent reps across all Schools and Communities
- Clear pathways for student leadership progression
- Increased retention of leaders and reduction in role fatigue or burnout
- Stronger impact reporting from rep and campaign activity
- Tangible recognition for students' leadership and employability development
- A self-sustaining leadership pipeline underpinned by community values

- **Summer 2025** Audit existing training, design induction + role maps, define badging scheme
- **Autumn 2025** Pilot welcome hub, run Rep & Leader Welcome Week, launch core skills modules
- **Spring 2026** Deliver advanced workshops and peer-learning events; test recognition model
- **2026–27** Fully integrate into Assembly/Executive cycles; evaluate via impact report and exit surveys

8. Implementation Road Map

This section outlines the phased delivery plan for the Students' Union 's democratic reform programme. It identifies practical actions over the short, medium, and long term, matched to the issues and solutions proposed in this review. Delivery will require clear ownership between the Students' Union staff, officers, and the University.

Short-Term Actions (0–6 Months)

Deadline: By December 2025

Focus on **clarity**, **engagement**, and **core decisions** to shape 2026 delivery

Action	Responsible	Notes	
Establish Joint SU– University Task & Finish Group for Class Rep reform	Students' Union & UoA	To lead on A1 and support early pilot planning	
Improve Class Rep visibility with termly introductions and MyAberdeen listings	School Reps & staff	Launch comms campaign via School support	
Launch "You Said, We Did So What?" communication model	Officers & Marketing	Align to priority campaigns and visible spaces	
Design and publish visual democratic framework	SU Governance & Comms	Create a simplified visual explaining each democratic tier (AMM, Assembly, Exec, Communities, etc.) for website, training, and officer induction	
Develop targeted comms strategy for PGT students	Students' Union Comms	Include election visibility, feedback opportunities	
Publish election role descriptions and "Why Run?" materials	Elections Team	At least 4 weeks pre-nomination	
Begin feedback platform specification and procurement process	Students' Union & UoA IT	Explore SIMON-style functionality	
Clarify the Students' Union's remit for TNE representation with university	Students' Union CEO & UoA International Team	High-level conversation; note in partnership plan	

Action	Responsible	Notes
Confirm Full-Time Officer cluster model in partnership with UoA		Finalise by December 2025 to inform 2026 elections
Redesign the Students' Union reception and welcome signage	0	Use space to reinforce visibility and belonging
Introduce feedback templates and micro- engagement tools for Reps	Rep Support Team	Shared drive or portal

Medium-Term Actions (6–12 Months)

Deadline: By June 2026

Action Responsible		Notes	
Pilot degree-based Class Rep structure in at least 3 Schools	Students' Union & Deans	Support with training and feedback tracking	
Launch first iteration of digital feedback platform	IT & Rep Support	Integrate into MyAberdeen and Teams	
Establish Student Executive Committee with defined composition	President	11-member model as outlined in Section 7	
Integrate Assembly priorities into officer workplans and campaign planning	Officers & Governance	Use Assembly decisions to steer annual officer objectives and campaign calendars, aligned with community organising cycle	
Elect new Cluster-aligned Officer team (based on agreed model)	Elections Team	Publicise new roles with storytelling emphasis	
Introduce intercultural and community organising training for Reps	Students' Union Training Team	Align to the community organising model	
Formalise recognised Student Communities structure	Governance	Constitutionally define rights and responsibilities	

Action	Responsible	Notes
Reserve elected Assembly seats for postgraduates and international students	5	Address underrepresentation in scrutiny roles
Begin design of Representation Handbook & Toolkit	Development	Digital-first format; co-designed with students

Long-Term Actions (12+ Months)

Action	Responsible	Notes
Evaluate pilot Class Rep structure and refine Union-wide model	Task Group	Use feedback and platform data to inform version 2
Fully embed digital feedback platform across the Students' Union democracy	Students' Union & UoA	Ensure rep usage, student visibility, and officer dashboards
Create formal pathways for TNE students into the Students' Union structures	Students' Union & TNE partners	Online Assembly access; part- time officer role; custom support
Publish comprehensive Representation Handbook	Students' Union	Embed in Rep induction, Community onboarding, and Staff support
Complete governance review to align Bylaws to new democratic structure	Trustee Board	Include Assembly, Executive, Communities, and TNE models
Establish periodic (3–5 year) external reviews of the Students' Union democracy	Governance & UoA	Peer-led or independent, aligned with quality assurance cycles
Build sustainability mechanisms for long-term Rep handover and leadership development	Students' Union	Include archives, shadowing, peer support, and succession planning

9. Conclusion

This review sets out fifiteen interlocking reforms that can transform the Students' Union's representative offer—backed by a clear implementation roadmap, timelines, and deliverables.

A key feature of this model is the shift to a simplified structure with only two recognised engagement routes: student communities and student groups. The report also replaces formal motion-led systems with community-generated campaigns and introduces a new Student Assembly and Executive to provide democratic clarity and delivery.

This review set out to ask a bold and necessary question: Does the Students' Union's democratic system **serve the students of today – and tomorrow?** Over 600 students, officers, staff, and stakeholders, gave us a clear answer:

Representation still matters But the current structures do not work for most students.

Students told us they want to be heard. They want transparency, action, and a sense of belonging. Yet, many experience representation as overly formal, hard to access, and disconnected from their real lives. Too often, representation is something that happens to them, not with them.

Meanwhile, the Students' Union operates in a challenging context - constrained resources, increasing diversity, and the growing responsibility to represent students studying globally, including those at transnational campuses. The challenges are real, but so is the opportunity.

This report does not recommend tweaks. It proposes a **rebuild**:

- From Council to Assembly
- From forums to recognised communities
- From complexity to clarity
- From passive feedback to digital empowerment
- From outdated structures to a relational, community organising model

It also calls on the University of Aberdeen to partner with the Students' Union in new ways: not only as a service provider, but as a strategic ally in governance, academic development, and community leadership. That includes resourcing TNE representation, investing in digital platforms, and embedding student voice at every level of institutional decision-making.

Above all, this review is a roadmap for rebuilding trust and legitimacy in the Students' Union's democracy. It envisions a model where students are not just asked to vote — but are invited to lead, question, organise, and change their institution for the better.

This is what a modern Students' Union must be.

With the vision, commitments, and actions outlined here, the Students' Union can become a national leader in inclusive, relational, and resilient student democracy — one that others look to as a model of meaningful engagement in the 21st century.

> Scott Farmer Deputy Director Coole Insight June 2025

