

Club and society elections

Briefing: bringing your club and society elections to life

This briefing explains how to develop the processes involved in organising and running successful, engaging and democratic elections for clubs and societies.

Introduction

Developing good quality, democratic elections is often discussed within students' unions, and is a key area of work for NUS. Only recently, however, the focus has shifted to include club and society elections as a key part of these discussions.

Many students' union staff and officer teams are now creating integrated approaches to their democratic procedures and structures, where clubs and societies are integrated with officer elections, as well as the academic representation structure.

NUS' work on democracy has also advanced recently, with fresh ideas being developed and new research commissioned. These ideas often feature clubs and societies.

Club and society elections that are democratic, and are underpinned by good communications and training for those involved will also lead to the development of better quality opportunities.

This briefing has been split into three sections:

- Before the elections
- The election
- After the elections

Before the election: procedures

The rules and procedures of club and society elections can usually be created using the students' union officer elections as a framework to work from. It makes sense to adapt these to suit your clubs and societies as the students involved will (hopefully) already have some experience of the SU procedures.

Another useful framework that should already be in place is the club or society constitution. This should give some indication of the governing principles that underpin the election. It is important for clubs and societies to understand that their election procedures and rules must match their constitution.

NUS have created guidance on club/society constitutions that can be found on the Student Opportunities Resource Hub.

The rules and procedures for club/society elections will be unique to your students' union. It is advisable that club/society staff work with sabbatical officers, as well as SU experts on democracy, to develop yours.

We've highlighted some of the decisions that must be made at this stage of your elections process.

When will the elections take place?

Some students' union dictate set dates, some say that they must happen within a specific term, and some leave it open.

Who can be on a club/society committee?

In most students' union, the committee is formed of current university/college students only. Non-students (staff/alumni/local community) are not allowed to be on the committee. This is to ensure the club/society is representative of the majority of the membership.

However in some clubs and societies it will be valuable to have a non-student on committee, as an advisor, a link to the community, etc. It is worth discussing this as a students' union and also worth monitoring this in your clubs and societies.

It may also be appropriate in your discussions to decide on any parameters of membership within your clubs and societies. For example, at Leeds University Union, only 20% of club or society members can be non-students of the University of Leeds. This means that at least 80% of each club or society's membership is made up of current students. It's a good idea to open up your clubs and societies to the community, to neighbouring colleges or universities, to alumni, and to college/university staff, but in capping the number of non-student members you ensure that your clubs and societies stay aligned with the purpose of your students' union, which should be to serve its members; current students of your college/university.

What is the quorum of the election?

'Quorum' is a term meaning the number of votes required to make the election representative of the membership, and therefore valid. Your SU election rules will probably give a percentage, which you may

choose to adopt for club/society elections. It is typical for the quorum for club/society elections to be around 10%. So, if the hockey club has 100 members, 10 members need to vote to make the election valid.

If quorum is not reached in the election, you would be advised to re-run the election after increasing promotion and encouraging more people to vote.

When will the club/society stop allowing new members to join before the election?

This will probably need to be decided to ensure that:

1. A candidate in the election cannot bring lots of friends to the club/society AGM, to vote for their friend and have no active engagement in the club/society.
2. An individual cannot arrive at the AGM, join the club/society and run in the election

Within your SU this may not be a problem, and certainly it would be unwise to introduce this rule if you have problems filling positions on committees, or with low membership numbers. However it is certainly something to consider, even if you decide that your SU won't introduce a cut-off point for new members.

When can your clubs/societies amend the committee positions?

The positions available on club/society committees may need to adapt to the needs of the membership or the strategic objectives of the club/society. For example, a club that wishes to entice more members in their first year may wish to create a role of 'first year representative', or a society doing lots of communications work may want to introduce a 'communications manager' to their team.

To make this democratic and fair it may be useful to introduce a procedure for creating



new positions/removal of positions/amendment of responsibilities of existing positions.

Is it ever appropriate to appoint club/society committees, instead of elections?

For some clubs and societies, the committee is selected rather than elected. For example, selection may be appropriate if there is a high level of technical ability needed for a role. NUS encourage clubs and societies to elect their leadership as it is more representative. However selection/appointment is permitted if this is explicitly outlined in the club/society constitution, which has been approved by the membership.

It is worth considering that if high level skills/experience is required for a role, it may be better for the students' union to create a paid role that performs this function, instead of asking volunteers to do it. For example, in some students' union media teams there will be a paid (often part-time, student) staff member to run the technical elements of the radio/TV studio.

Before the election: people

Who is responsible for club and society elections in your students' union?

- Society/club staff
- SU democracy team
- Sabbatical officers
- Senior managers in SU
- Club/society committee
- Club/society members

All are in some way responsible. Ensuring that club and society elections are supported across the union will help to increase engagement with the SU.

Officers should be championing clubs with great democratic engagement. Senior managers

should be ensuring that there are adequate resources in place to allow for clubs and societies to engage in democracy.

A Returning Officer is responsible for the election and ensuring it's fair.

You might choose to get a range of staff involved as a Returning Officer for your club and society elections.

It's worth thinking about whether your Returning Officer for club/society elections is one staff member across the union, or a chance to expose other staff to democratic engagement.

Club and society committees at the University of Plymouth Students' Union are trained as Returning Officers and then asked to return the elections of other clubs and societies. This is a fantastic development opportunity for the individuals who act as Returning Officer, and also spreads the workload across many people.

How much should the students' union manage club and society elections?

Students' union take different approaches to managing these elections. The level of involvement will depend upon:

- Staff/officer capacity and capability
- Club/society needs
- SU priorities

At Middlesex students' union they had problems with their society elections; if societies even ran them they mostly not very democratic. Most didn't run elections at all. This led to many societies being badly managed, no handovers, and generally this was driving quality down in societies. They wanted to change this. For their 2014-15, the SU have centrally organised the nomination and election procedure, using an online elections platform (NUS Digital).

If club and society elections are generally well-run and fair, it may not be necessary to heavily manage them.

Before the election: promotion

There are three main activities that will need to be communicated to club/society committees, to election candidates, and to club/society members.

The rules

Elections are complicated and this may be a student's first direct experience of a democratic election. Make sure you explain the rules at least once to those who need to know. It may also be useful to provide written, as well as verbal guidance on the election rules and procedures.

Remember it is important for club/society members to understand the rules, too.

Open of nominations

Actively and centrally promoting the opening of nominations for club/society elections is important.

You should encourage clubs and societies to make it really easy for someone to stand in their election. Removing barriers here is really important; something as small as a complicated form can be enough to put-off a potential candidate.

The same applies for candidates in your main students' union officer elections. Many students' unions combine these with their club/society elections, as well as the elections for academic reps. This means that the communications, training and organising can be a combined approach, helping the students' union. For students, there's an added buzz around elections, and they are probably more likely to engage.

Talking about the skills and experience that a student is likely to develop when taking on a role is a great way to encourage them to stand in an election.

Finally, many students' union promote the value of being on a committee all year, rather than just at the time when people need to stand. This is great as it makes students more aware of the opportunities available to them.

Election/AGM event

Even if the club/society elections are run online, it's worth running an AGM or election results event as members can they feel more involved in the club/society.

Central promotion from the students' union can really help with this kind of event. It would also be interesting to see if a combined AGM/elections result event for all clubs/societies could work?

The election: how to conduct

NUS don't prescribe a set way to run an election, as this needs to be selected as appropriate for individual clubs and societies.

The three main ways to run an election in clubs and societies are:

- Online
- Paper
- Hands-up

There are positives and negatives involved with each method:

Online

Positives:

- Increase turn-out in election
- Encourages people to run
- Makes it easier for students
- Can be monitored by SU to ensure fairness



Negatives:

- Can be complicated to set-up and administer
- Reliant on software

Paper

Positives:

- Easy to organise for both SU & club/society
- Onus is on club/society committee to take responsibility
- Encourages students to meet – more sociable

Negatives:

- Requires strict administration at the voting event
- Needs Returning Officer

Hands-up

Positives:

- More laid-back/casual – suits some clubs/societies
- Very easy to organise

Negatives:

- Very difficult to monitor and count
- Needs Returning Officer

The election: how to calculate

NUS recommends ATV (Alternative Transferable Voting)/STV (Single Transferable Voting) as they are the fairest methods.

NUS have produced videos to support with students' union elections. Included is the [NUS ATV explained](#) video.

The election/AGM event

The election/election results/AGM event is a fantastic opportunity for a club/society as it forms a useful part of the handover from outgoing to incoming committee, as members and committee can discuss past successes and future plans.

Members can also vote and debate the strategic direction of the club/society, and make decisions about the finances of the group.

To make the event really successful, consider:

- Welcome – committees should make members feel welcome and involved with the event. Terminology and the agenda should be explained.
- Sign-in – ensure the election is fair and that each member only gets one vote.
- Returning Officer – if appropriate, the RO can welcome everyone and explain the rules.
- Timely – don't make it too long, and ensure the event happens at the best time of the day for the members.
- Fun – although important, elections and AGMs don't have to be boring!

After the election: paperwork

Many students' union staff and officers spend a lot of time chasing registration/handover paperwork from club and society committees.

Think about how you can make this more efficient through planning and organisation. Provide the outgoing committees with the right paperwork before the election, and reward those that hand it in by the deadline. Also, ensure the paperwork is easy to complete. Have a look at NUS' guidance about 'breaking through bureaucracy' on the Student Opportunities Resource Hub for more information about revolutionising your processes.

After the election: handover, induction & training

Handover, induction, and initial training can contribute to the success of the club or society; handover from outgoing to incoming committee creates consistency, an induction to the SU can avoid many of the obvious questions, as can appropriate training.

Guidance on handover and training, as well as development planning, can be found on the Student Opportunities Resource Hub.

Further information

This briefing was created following a Student Opportunities Lunch & Learn webinar that took place on 20th February 2014. The slides from this webinar are available on the Student Opportunities pages on NUS Connect.

Glossary

AGM – Annual General Meeting

ATV – Alternative Transferable Voting

Quorum – the number of voters required to make the election representative of the membership and therefore valid.

Returning Officer – the person responsible for overseeing the election and ensuring that it is fair.

Further information

This briefing was created following a Student Opportunities Lunch & Learn webinar that took place on 20th February 2014. The slides from this webinar are available on the Student Opportunities pages on NUS Connect.

Included at the end of this document is a case study from Middlesex University Students' Union.

Further reading

Electoral Reform Society explanation of different [voting systems](#).

NUS article explaining ['Five Ideas for Motivating & Training Candidates'](#)

NUS report, ['That's what she said'](#) – about women student's experiences of 'lad culture in higher education

NUS ['I Will Lead the Way'](#) (Women in Leadership work)

Government website explaining different [voting systems](#)

[Guardian article, 'Do men control the key student societies at university?'](#)

If you would like any further information about anything in this guide, please contact [Rosie Hunnam](#), Student Opportunities Co-ordinator at NUS.

Middlesex University Students' Union (MDXSU)

About

This resource explains how MDXSU changed how they managed society elections to make them more democratic.

The idea

The idea was a pretty standard goal for SUs but one that can often be met with confusion or be seen as adding barriers; to filter down democratic elections to include society committee members instead of committees being self-selecting which can lead to cliques, and lack of incremental growth year-on-year.

Our societies had never done democratic elections for their committee members. The problem was that we didn't give societies enough support or empower them to take ownership over their own society's welfare and future health; three people would run a society for three years and then leave, the society disappearing with them. We wanted societies to value themselves and their community enough to build future leaders for the society who are chosen by the members to represent the views and needs of those members.

Development stages

We did some research, but mainly looking at our policies and practices about being a democratic-led organisation and what this actually means to how we work. Although perhaps 'obvious', we decided that all representative positions should be elected. Of course, the committees of societies are included in this; however, we knew that it wouldn't be easy to facilitate a cultural shift so I would recommend talking to any SUs that have been through this shift – including MDXSU as we would be happy to chat with anyone about it in more detail.

We used NUS Digital to centralise our society elections so that we could ensure that they had been democratic and fair. The website is not ideal in terms of conducting elections as a whole but for societies it works well (although it is time-consuming and rather laborious). Societies have given us positive feedback; reporting on how easy it was, particularly to vote, and how accessible it was to read manifestos online etc. However, it does take away something from the end of year AGM atmosphere by moving everything online which we are adjusting for the end of this year by giving societies the option of launching their elections or the voting period at an AGM where they can summarise the year, socialise etc.

If you were to implement online society elections in stages then you could first democratically elect your mandatory roles online, and then work up to running the optional roles online, too.

Indicators of success

It hasn't made our lives easier per se. Some societies have taken to it readily and without question, understanding that the way to have a happy camp is to give members a say over who represents their views and needs. Some haven't, but it was a cultural shift at the end of the last academic year and start of this one –

our elections and subsequent detailed handover process before Easter (fingers crossed) is one that is being asked about by societies now instead of us chasing them to think about inspiring new leaders and passing on useful information that is integral to the society growing incrementally year-on-year. And they are coming up with the ideas themselves now – Lead A Society event will take place at the end of March with the focus on finding and inspiring students to stand for a committee position. It will be a good way to articulate the experiences and opportunity, and give some closure to those who are outgoing. The outcome is that we have 90% of our societies this year democratically elected as opposed to 0% in 2012/13. We are planning to measure the impact in our annual MSSS survey by asking questions about electing committee members democratically, gauging opinion on the process as well as understanding the ethos behind it.

Further information

Perhaps we do a disservice to opportunities/activities when we allow societies to self-select, or sit in a room and do a 'hands-up' to elect their new committee. Perhaps we put barriers in their way by democratically electing societies' committees. The balance between these is hard to judge and is perhaps union-specific according to culture, strategic plans, etc. However in Middlesex we have seen a gradual acceptance of the benefits of democratic elections from most of our societies and some now are anticipating it. Some are even looking forward to helping new leaders emerge and be elected based on their vision and values. Outgoing committee members are starting to see this as very precious and personal for – their society, their community – and they want it to be looked after, valued and developed year-on-year. We have found that democratically electing sets this precedent and we are doing all we can to continue it.

For more information about this, please contact [Tommy Browne](#), Student Activities Development Co-ordinator at MDXSU.



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