

Election of Members to the Student Council Meeting

Introduction

The Academic Year 16/17 was the first that the new democratic model for policy making and student oversight of the Executive was fully implemented. The Annual General Meeting has been replaced with an online Ideas system which has increased student engagement in the democratic policy making process of the SU and has allowed multiple access points to this year round. More policy proposals (Ideas) have been submitted than in the previous academic years with 111 submissions and from a wider range of students than before; the number of students submitting repeat proposals is less than 5% of the total. The submissions have also covered a wide range of areas; sustainability and environmental issues, academic representation, charity, commercial activity, the running of the SU, housing and national government policy to name a few. The Student Council Meeting's role in scrutinising Ideas and the Executive is an essential mechanism in maintaining robust accountability and the safeguarding of the Union's reputation and financial concerns.

At present, twenty students are elected from the Union's three area conferences, Societies, Sport and Reps, with five each from Sport and Reps and ten from Societies (half of which represent the National, Faith and Identity Societies). There are currently three conferences per academic year planned to occur before the three Student Council Meetings and members are elected at each conference.

Background

As part of the Review which formalised the new democratic model, an evaluation of effectiveness and functioning is required. Feedback from Student Council members has shown consistent and high level satisfaction with the Ideas system and the new direct engagement model. The effectiveness of the system and the engagement from students has surpassed the Union's initial estimates. Initial aims were for 100 Ideas over the academic year, 111 have been submitted to date, and 1,000 voters, 823 students have voted on Ideas. These were new measurements and so to have exceeded the first and to be so be over 80% of the way to the second in the first year of operation is impressive. For information of the diversity of students voting; students from at least 138 different courses and 58 countries voted, over 50% of those who voted were female and voters study at every campus (including votes from our partner colleges). The lessons learned from this year have allowed the Union to take forward action to increase engagement as measured by Ideas submitted and individual votes cast, this includes:

- Inclusion of the new democratic model in new student induction talks
- Inclusion of the new democratic model in generic Union training for students
- The creation of animated videos explaining how the Student Ideas system works
- Specific meetings offered to individual Idea holders to aid them in any campaign activity
- Agreed Bye-Law amendments, proposed from the DPC and approved by Council, to bring the Bye-laws up to date with the reality of the new democratic model

In addition to this, it is recognised that the good functioning and effectiveness of the Student Council Meeting's ability to consider, debate and scrutinise is wholly dependent on its members. The Union is very keen to be able to provide the necessary support and advice to Council members to ensure that they make informed decisions, that they feel confident in their role and are serving their constituents well. The following three proposals are put forward for consideration in order to help achieve this:

Proposal 1: Maintain the current number of Council meetings and elections

Pros:

- No additional work load or administration required
- New elections to each Meeting allows different students to have the opportunity to engage and be part of the democratic process
- Prevents complacency developing among members
- Keeps the Student Council Meeting and its work on the agenda of each conference

Cons:

- Difficult for the Union to support potentially 20 new students at every meeting
- Students may have less idea of who their Council members are because of the turnover, reducing their ability to lobby them
- May not keep pace with the (hoped for) increased number of Student Ideas
- Creates inequality between new and more experienced members which could reduce willingness to contribute from the latter
- Expertise and confidence gained by members could be lost if they are not re-elected or cannot attend their relevant conference
- Reaching quorum is problematic with three election points and new members for each Meeting; a possible perception of a lack of seriousness

Proposal 2: Increase the minimum number of Council Meetings from 3 to 4 and elect members twice (with the option for re-election) to attend half of these

Pros:

- Starts to keep pace with the (hoped for) increased number of Student Ideas
- Students have a better idea of who their Council members are allowing them to engage with them more
- Can still fit in to the current conference timetable
- Still allows the potential for new members and fresh eyes on issues but allows members to attend more than one Meeting
- Expertise and confidence gained by members can benefit more than one Meeting
- The problem of reaching quorum, although not solved, begins to be addressed because of all of the previous 'Pros'

Cons:

- Doesn't remove the turnover of Council members only reducing it thus support for members could still be problematic
- Paradoxically could create greater disparity between new and existing members if newly elected members attend only two meetings compared to four for other members
- Students may still find it difficult to know who Council members are if they change mid-year
- Expertise and confidence gained by members could be lost if they are not re-elected or cannot attend their relevant conference

Proposal 3: Increase the minimum number of Council Meetings from 3 to 4 and elect members once at the start of the year to attend all of these

Pros:

- Starts to keep pace with the (hoped for) increased number of Student Ideas
- Students have a better idea of who their Council members are allowing them to engage with them more
- Removes the turnover of Council members allowing the SU to support them more thoroughly
- Can still fit in to the current conference timetable
- Expertise and confidence gained by members can benefit all Meetings
- The problem of reaching quorum, although not solved, begins to be addressed because of all of the previous 'Pros'

Cons:

- Only one set of students will be able to attend which could lead to complacency among them or discourage those who were not elected from engaging in the democratic processes again
- The Student Council Meeting could be mentioned at only the first of the three conferences reducing members' connection to their constituents
- Increases the burden on individual members to attend more meetings across the year
- Incurs a (small) administrative burden in changing the Union governance calendar and conference terms of reference

N.B. – by approving either Proposal 2 or Proposal 3, Council will also be approving a change to the terms of reference to the three area conferences only for the purpose of enacting this change