

UEA(SU) DEMOCRACY REVIEW

OCTOBER 2020



FOREWORD FROM YOUR CAMPAIGNS AND DEMOCRACY OFFICER



Students have a long history in connecting with activism, pushing for change both as a campus community and as a wider part of society. Here at UEA we are no different. We've championed causes and campaigns such as anti-apartheid protests, to championing LGBT+ rights and gender equality. We have a deep history of student engagement and activism here at UEA of which the Student Union has helped facilitate, providing a platform to empower and elevate our voices.

Whilst this activism and passion to change of course remains prevalent, the manner in which we as Students interact with the processes of change has altered. The combination of reduced time, and our current structures had lead students to describe us as 'bureaucratic' and difficult to engage with. Our democratic committees and meetings have witnessed a decline in engagement in attendance, along with our electoral processes. As our priorities continue to grow, this stagnation will likely continue under our current structure and the majority of students will continue to be side-lined. They will continue to not understanding or being aware of how they can influence and impact the change they want to see – a fault of ours not theirs.

Despite this, the responsibilities of Student Unions, both legally and as part of their ethos has not changed. As set out in the 1994 Education Act, Student Unions remain bound by their own constitutions and legal boundaries. For us here at uea (su), this means we are still required to have an outlined number of Union Council Meetings, Sabbatical Officer Elections and AGM's among other things, all of which sit under our Democratic structure. However, we continue to witness inconsistent engagement in these processes, particularly at our Union Council meetings. This can affect our ability to conduct our democratic governance in accordance with our byelaws if we do not meet the required number of Student Representatives. This declining attendance also imperils our entire democratic ideal, impacting the diversity of our student opinion. In consequence, with the legal responsibilities still paramount but with Student engagement declining, Student Union's across the United Kingdom have been encouraged to assess how they run their democratic structures, how can they transform these processes to make them more accessible to students who want to efficiently and effectively make change?

Here at uea (su) we are a Student Union in which our student members sit at the very heart – it's clichéd but true. Given the above, it is our purpose to therefore ensure that our democratic structures and processes, as well as our points of entry for Student engagement are not only simple, clear and easy to find but are catered for you, decided by you and led by you.

Hamish Williams

CAMPAIGNS AND DEMOCRACY OFFICER

WHY WAS A DEMOCRACY REVIEW CHOSEN?

During the 18/19 academic year, the Campaigns and Democracy Officer had a manifesto pledge to understand why our democratic structures were not working. Through a series of focus groups it became clear that students did not fully understand the current democratic structures, and that there was a feeling that the Student's Union did not represent its members.

To better understand what does and does not work within student union democracy, we toured several student unions around the country. This combined with the data collected from the focus groups led us to the conclusion that an external review of our democratic structures was needed. Previous reviews had been conducted in house, however these reviews failed to tackle the underlying issue that our democratic structures were not accessible for all students which was leading to a lack of engagement.

A funding request was taken to the last Student Officer Committee (SOC) meeting of 2018/19 where the committee of student officers were asked to consider the need for an external review and to approve the money required. SOC approved the request which then led to the union undertaking an external consultation process of our current structures, and engaging in a full democracy review.

THE REVIEW

The Democracy Review was carried out by Coole Insight, a consultant with a great deal of experience within student unions and in conducting democracy reviews. Following the initial proposal and meetings between Coole Insight and uea(su), it was clear to Coole Insight that given the strong appetite for change, the review should be conducted 'in spite' of our current structures - that is to say, instead of reviewing and tweaking the current structure, a new structure was to be suggested based on how students wished to engage, and the issues they wished to engage on.

The starting point for the review was to establish how students wanted to engage with democracy at uea(su), which provided the foundations for designing new and different forms of engagement. In order to achieve engagement, it is first important to understand the behaviours and preferences of the people we are trying to engage.

Working with uea(su), a set of stakeholders was identified from the student body, the SU staff team, elected student officers and the University. Interviews were held with these stakeholders in line with the values of uea(su) and provided insight into how our values were being 'lived' as well as offering insight and understanding from those who regularly engage with the current democratic structures.

In addition to these interviews, student focus groups were conducted, the aim of which was to understand how students were currently engaging with and experiencing the democratic structure. The space was also used to test the preferences of students on how they would like to engage with democracy at uea(su), 'in spite' of the current approach.

Coole Insight now had a set of indicators to shape different models of democratic structures. Through a mix of desk based research and information gathering, Coole Insight looked to suggest improvements in the areas that require attention based on the insight gained from the interviews, focus groups and outcomes of a membership survey.

New democratic models were then presented to uea(su) with the recommendation that students have the final say on how they want to engage with the SU's democracy and as such the options should be put to the student body through a 'preferendum'.



DEMOCRACY REVIEW FINDINGS

A range of students were invited to be a part of the democracy review through collective focus groups and individual interviews. The reasoning for this part of the review was to ensure it was student lead, giving both engaged and unengaged members the opportunity to be involved. As a Union, our current democratic model was initially developed with the aim to reflect and support our values as an organisation. However, the feedback from students in interviews conducted up to this point led us to believe this was not the case, and that moving forward they should have the opportunity to tell us how our values could be incorporated into our structures more effectively.

Alongside these interviews, the review ran a series of focus groups with students to understand how they are engaged with and experiencing our current democratic system. These focus groups were then also used to try and gain a preference on how students would ideally like to engage with the union democracy. Rather than attempting to develop models based on external insight, it was of important to the officer team that students were given the chance to shape how the models were developed from the start.

When students were asked what the Unions purpose was, the response from focus groups outlined key themes such as '**representation**', '**to improve student experience**' and to empower and protect. When asked to outline the Union's strengths, students identified them as "**providing opportunities**", our work on "**inclusivity and liberation**", "running events"; and that we were "good at the inspiration bit".

On the other hand, when asked about areas of weakness there were three clear themes from across the focus groups and these are summarised through the following quotes – "It doesn't matter what I say or what I want to change because everything is **too system focused**", "we are far too soft with the University relationship" and "absolutely everything the SU does is **bureaucratic**".

In a bid to formulate what members wanted from a democracy structure, respondents were then asked about what democracy meant to them. They outlined "**Giving our members voice and power** over making decisions that are important to them in the students' union" and that "It's about representation, **an easy process** so that voices of the collective are heard, and following this communication you create change that fits in with the needs of the community that you represent".

A notable piece of feedback from a student contributor also outlined that they felt the new model should be "**Ensuring that everyone can participate at different levels** whether it's voting, being involved in the decision-making process, or being the representatives for different tiers". Concluding on the interviews and focus groups, it was clear that a sense of simplicity, ease of access and diversity were key foundations for what our members wanted in a new model.

THE REVIEW RECOMMENDATIONS

The democracy review presented three new democratic models at the end of the review period. Each model sought to encompass a different type of democracy, all including key requirements our members outlined.

They are as follows:

Model A

Deliberation, Grassroots and Consensus the principles of this model are around flexibility, putting more power into the hands of members (which includes elected FTO's) whilst using a structure that will enable more of a consensus to be reached before arriving at the policy development and decision-making stage. It is about making resource more accessible for students through direct financing and staff expertise. This model speaks to students wanting more involvement in decision making and action.

Model B

Representative, Procedural and Radical this model attempts to provide a clear cycle and process of students' union decision making whilst embedding the radical elements around freedom, equality and liberation. It places elections more at the heart of the process than with model A and is built of the idea that the best decisions will be made through clear process, structure and regular accountability. This model speaks to students wanting more involvement whilst retaining an element of being happy with others taking big decisions on their behalf.

Model C

Model A & B Hybrid? Coole Insight understands that students may look at the two models and want all the different decision-making mechanisms to exist. It is possible to combine the two models relatively simply, however in practice the hybrid of these models could carry a greater risk of retaining some of the issues that this review is trying to resolve.

Model D

Status quo Retain the current democratic system at UEASU and nothing changes

NEXT STEPS

The next steps were to translate the democracy reviews recommendations into multiple new democratic options. Once done, students would have the option to indicate their preference and choice of our new structure through a student wide vote via a referendum. This would be a binding vote and decision to move to the winning structure.

The design of the referendum was 'a game of cones', using an ice cream design to separate the different structure options into different flavours. This was a way to make the very heavy topic matter more engaging and fun for students to approach. Below you will see the three models as presented to the student body during the vote.

OPTION A

how could I change things with this model?

step one
A student proposes an idea to take to the Student Exec.

step two
The student then completes an online form outlining the proposed idea and its reasoning. If they have 50 likes it progresses to Student Exec.

step three
When the idea reaches Student Exec, they can carry out any of the following actions:
 - Approve
 - Send back for further development
 - Send to public vote
 - Send to Conference

how do power structures work in this model?

student exec
In this model, the 'Student Exec' would be a body of students representing Full-Time Officers, representatives from the Group Execs, and part-time officers. This body would have the power to approve student motions, return them for further development, or send them to referendum or conference (we'll explain that in a minute!)

activist groups
There would be six of these in total. They would be able to apply for money from Student Exec and their activities would be supported by guidelines, part-time officers, and full-time officers. FTOs would provide the Student Exec with regular updates on work undertaken by the Activist Groups.

group execs
This could be composed of a Sports Exec, a Society Exec, an Education Exec, and a Postgraduate Exec.

zones
Five student-run bodies that would meet on an every-other-month basis to discuss motions and either pass and implement them, send them to a public vote, or take them to up to Council, Conference, or the AGM if needing more deliberation.

EXBGS
Student executive groups, each with a particular focus, who could make policy suggestions to zones and make decisions regarding finances.

This model is an indication of what would be developed through consultation following the result of the public vote.

vote at uea.su/elections from 9th - 12th march show us you've voted & get a free treat on us!

OPTION B

how could I change things with this model?

step one
A student proposes an idea to the relevant Zone Exec.

step two
If the Zone Exec likes the idea, they can take it further. If not, the student can always develop it and try again.

step three
The Zone Exec is now able to take the proposed idea and either
 - Create and implement the policy
 - Create the policy and send it to council
 - Create the policy and send it to referenda

how do power structures work in this model?

winter council, spring conference & agm
These meetings would be for discussing, passing, and refusing motions. The Winter Council and the Spring Conference would be twice a year, and the Annual General Meeting would be once a year.

zones
Five student-run bodies that would meet on an every-other-month basis to discuss motions and either pass and implement them, send them to a public vote, or take them to up to Council, Conference, or the AGM if needing more deliberation.

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OPTION C

this is the current system! here's how it works:

step one
A motion is created. To create a motion, you need to be an elected Union Councillor, or a representative of Union Council (such as a Full-Time Officer). Motions need the support of two members of Union Council to progress; this can include you, the proposer.

step two
The Democratic Procedures Committee checks to make sure the motion meets requirements.

step three
The motion is added to the agenda and sent out four days before Union Council. Councillors can submit amendments during this time which can either be accepted before or debated during the meeting.

step four
The motion is debated at Union Council. An elected Chair oversees the meeting, maintaining structure.

step five
The motion requires a majority to pass if it does not propose changing a by-law. If it does propose a change, it needs a 2/3 majority.

how do power structures work in this model?

trustee board

- union council
 - democratic procedures committee
 - postgraduate committee
 - education sub committee
- management committee
 - student officer committee
 - welfare sub committee
 - development oversight boards
 - liberation, equality & diversity sub committee
 - soc execs
 - ethics & environment sub committee

liberations, societies & assemblies

This model is an indication of what would be developed through consultation following the result of the public vote.

vote at uea.su/elections from 9th - 12th march show us you've voted & get a free treat on us!

THE VOTE

The referendum for the democracy review took place during the 2020 student elections, as an additional vote. The reasoning to attach it to the officer election was to be able to increase the effort and engagement during a single voting period rather than draw out and risk voter apathy if we were to host two separate voting periods.

Students were given the three options, and able to vote using a preferential voting system, voting in order of preference rather than just selecting one. If quorate was met during the referendum, the winning model at the end of the voting period would have consensus and be accepted as the new model for democracy.

However, during the end of the voting, we were unable as a Union to pull the minimum number of voters to reach quorum. It is stated that Subject to Clause 69 of the Articles of Association, a resolution may only be passed by Referendum (or preferendum) if at least one thirtieth (3%) of the ordinary members cast a vote in the Referendum and a majority of the votes cast are in favour of the resolution. Although due to this, the results were not a binding. We were however, able to use the results as an indicative vote showing student preference rather than a binding decision. With 200 more votes, it is clear below that model A was more favourable.

A GAME OF CONES

Results:

Option A: For 476 Against 116 Abstain: 135

Option B: For:279, Against: 233, Abstain: 200

Option C: For: 246, Against: 301, Abstain: 172



Without having a full consensus on the outcome of the referendum, the next way of making the decision binding would be to bring the democracy review to union council and enable council members to vote on the recommendations, which would make it binding.

If passed, the recommended model would come into effect in the year 2021-2022. Due to the nature of the matter at hand, we would need to conduct a full bye-law review to ensure the new model would be reflected in our constitution. It is proposed that the democracy review be brought to council and voted on in **principle**, which means that option A be passed as a general outline and that staff and officers would be mandated to bring forward a more detailed comprehensive option A structure at a later date.

The byelaws would then need to be brought back to union council to be voted on before the end of the academic year.

MODEL A: THE PROPOSED MODEL:

Student Groups

What are they?

Student groups will be the grass roots of the structure. They encompass what students have been asking for, an informal, low commitment group with resources and funding for students to easily carry out small campaigns and events. Student groups at their heart provide a place for campaigning and events on matters students care about, and will give a home to our liberation, welfare and more community based aspects of student engagement.

Who sits on it?

Groups will meet on average once a month. Groups will be low commitment in that any student may attend, without having to be formal members of the group. The key idea is for students who have a passion for a specific matter or cause can be involved with a group without having to fully commit to a years' worth of meetings. Each group will be supported by an elected officer to provide guidance and support. These officers will also sit on the Student Forum, thus able to bring forward any concerns or issues from the various groups.

What do they do?

Each group will get a budget, allocated by the Student Forum at the start of the year, alongside guidance on how this money can be allocated. This budget is a way for everyday students to have the resources to host events or support campaigns in line with the groups remit. Rules will be that events or campaign ideas can be passed so long as they do not compromise or effect the Unions byelaws, key values, student interests or is not over a certain amount of money. Members of the group are then able to vote on the application, based on the reasoning for it, how much funding students require, and the scope of impact to the student body. They can vote to accept the application and grant the student the funding, reject it or if they feel the application is with reference to the byelaws, it would be referred up to the student forum.

Where does its powers stop?

Student Groups will not have policy making powers, nor will they be able to vote on or submit motions to change the Unions byelaws. These groups are solely for the purpose of enabling everyday students to have opportunities to run campaigns or events and to build communities without having to fully commit to an official position within the democratic structure of the union. If a group has an issue they need higher support on, the officer associated to the group can take it to the Forum on their behalf.

What could these groups look like?

The Union will conduct further research into what groups students want and how they want to engage with them. Due to the need of also holding an officer review, the remit of student groups and how many groups there are, will be confirmed at a later date. Other unions who have a similar model to the one we are proposing have created student groups with a liberation remit, such as a LGBT+ group, Environmental and Black Student Group highlighting the kind of groups we could see.

MODEL A: THE PROPOSED MODEL:

Group Executive Committees (GEC)

What is it?

Group Executive Committees are a branch of the first tier of this democracy model. They comprise of already existing successful committees that are organised, elected and formal: the Sports Executive, Society Executive, Postgraduate Committee and Education Committee.

Little has changed with these groups as they continue to be effective, and feedback during the review showed that students found them easy to engage with. These committees are made up of elected chairs and representatives who meet on a regular basis with the purpose of discussing and improving the portfolio they represent. They will each elect two representatives to sit on the Student Forum.

PG committee:

The Postgraduate Committee, which is elected by the Assembly at the start of the academic year, is made up of six elected postgraduate representatives and four of the full-time elected officers, as well as a representative of the NBI. The Committee take part in decisions on allocating the SU's postgraduate(su) budget, organising events and campaigns, and use of the Graduate Centre.

Education Committee: The Education Committee represents both undergraduate and postgraduate students in all academic matters. Committee meetings are attended by conveners and education officers, with the purpose of enhancing the academic experience of every student at UEA.

Societies Executive and Sports Executive: Societies Exec Committee and Sports Exec Committee, made up of an elected representative for each category of society and club, who meet once a month. Their job is to help decide how to allocate funding to clubs and societies, review applications for new student groups and pass on feedback from students to Union staff.

Where do their powers stop?

Each committee has its own outlined power, but they cannot make bye-law changes. This is when they need to submit motions to the Student Forum.

MODEL A: THE PROPOSED MODEL:

The Student Forum

What is it?

The Student Forum will be absorbing and combining what we current know as Union Council and the Student Officer Committee. This will be the main source of policy change and byelaw amendments in the democratic structure. Students who wish to pass union policy, change/amend/ or add a byelaws or to represent the voice of ordinary members must submit a motion online to the Student Forum. Students do not need to be in a formal union position to submit motions, removing barriers to participation and engagement.

Who sits on it?

The Student Forum is made up of Society Exec x2 | Sports Exec x2 | Postgraduate Exec x2 | Education Exec x2 | FTOs | PTO's . The collective membership of the Student Forum would represent every single student at the University. Any ordinary student can attend the meeting without voting rights. If they are a proposer of a motion, they may be asked to discuss, add detail or support their motion if needed to at the time of voting.

What does it do?

- Approving the allocation of funding to student groups
- Officer and Exec member accountability
- To consider and then submit their vote on motions and or bye-law changes/updates/additional
- Policy lapse
- Bring forward any concerns from their constituents
- Continuously monitor the engagement levels and success of the democracy structure to prevent stagnation and student disengagement with the Union

Once a motion is submitted, it will be considered, discussed and debated by the entire Student Forum. Changes or amendments can be made to the motions with consensus of the meeting. Motions must be discussed thoroughly, and then voted on. Motions need a majority vote to be approved. If approved, **the motion becomes policy**, if rejected it will be sent back to the proposer who can amend and return to the next meeting.

Where does its powers stop?

There are limitations to the level of policy or bye-law changes that the Student Forum can make. If a motion could affect the day to day running of the Union, impact its financial footing, or cause imminent danger to its members, it must be forwarded on to conference where a referendum will be decided on, and given to the trustee board to discuss.

MODEL A: THE PROPOSED MODEL:

Conference

What is it?

Conference is the highest point in the proposed structure and sits at the top of the democracy route. It will take place twice a year, in the Autumn and Spring terms. The conference's key purpose is to host the Union's AGM - which is a legal requirement, be a main link between ordinary students and the day to day finances and running of the union, and proceed over the most controversial or high impact policy or byelaw proposals by students.

What does it do?

Policy: Any motion that could change the structures or general day to day running of the Union, would need to be passed up to Conference. The reasoning for the most controversial motions to be sent to Conference is to enable all students, not just elected representatives on the Forum or those who do not engage with a student group or exec to have a say on the most significant changes that could affect them through an instant referendum. By enabling conference to be an open meeting to all students, those who would not normally have a say on motions and the Unions policy are able to. It provides a low commitment opportunity to enable students to get involved.

AGM: The Autumn Conference will also act as the AGM (Annual General Meeting). This meeting will include a review of Union finances, reports from Executive committees and Student Groups (including financial reports) and a Student Officer Q&A.

Vice Chancellor Q&A: The spring conference will include a question and answer session from the Vice Chancellor. This has usually been done in the first term, however by moving it to the end of the year and to the Conference setting it gives every single student a better opportunity to develop a good understanding of the University, thus have much more confidence in holding the Vice Chancellor to account.

Officer Accountability: Every conference meeting will give attendees the opportunity to hold their officer team to account. Through an update of work and manifesto priorities, to a live Q&A session, any attendee is able to ask any member of the full officer team a question.

Who sits on it? The full Student Forum group will be required to attend, other than this, attendance is open and highly encouraged to all students.

Where does its powers stop? If a controversial policy is passed by the conference, but it may have legal implications on the Union, the trustee board have the ultimate power to overturn the decision.

Model A



4. Conference

- The highest point of our democratic structure
- It is open for all students to attend.

- Any motion that could change the running or the structure of the Union would need to be passed at Conference.

3. Student Forum

- It will deal with Policy Change and Bye-Law amendments and is made up of:

- Society Exec x2
- Sports Exec x2
- Postgraduate Exec x2
- Education Exec x2
- FTO's
- PTO's

2. Student Groups

- They are informal and require low levels of commitment.
- They will be the home of our Liberation and Welfare Groups TBC.
- These groups will sit at the heart of grass roots Student campaigning.
- Each group will be supported by an elected PTO to help them with the process

2. Group Executives

- Sports Executives
- Society Executives
- Postgraduate Committee
- Education Committee

1. Students

- Any Student can propose an idea to their relevant group via an online form



CONCLUSION

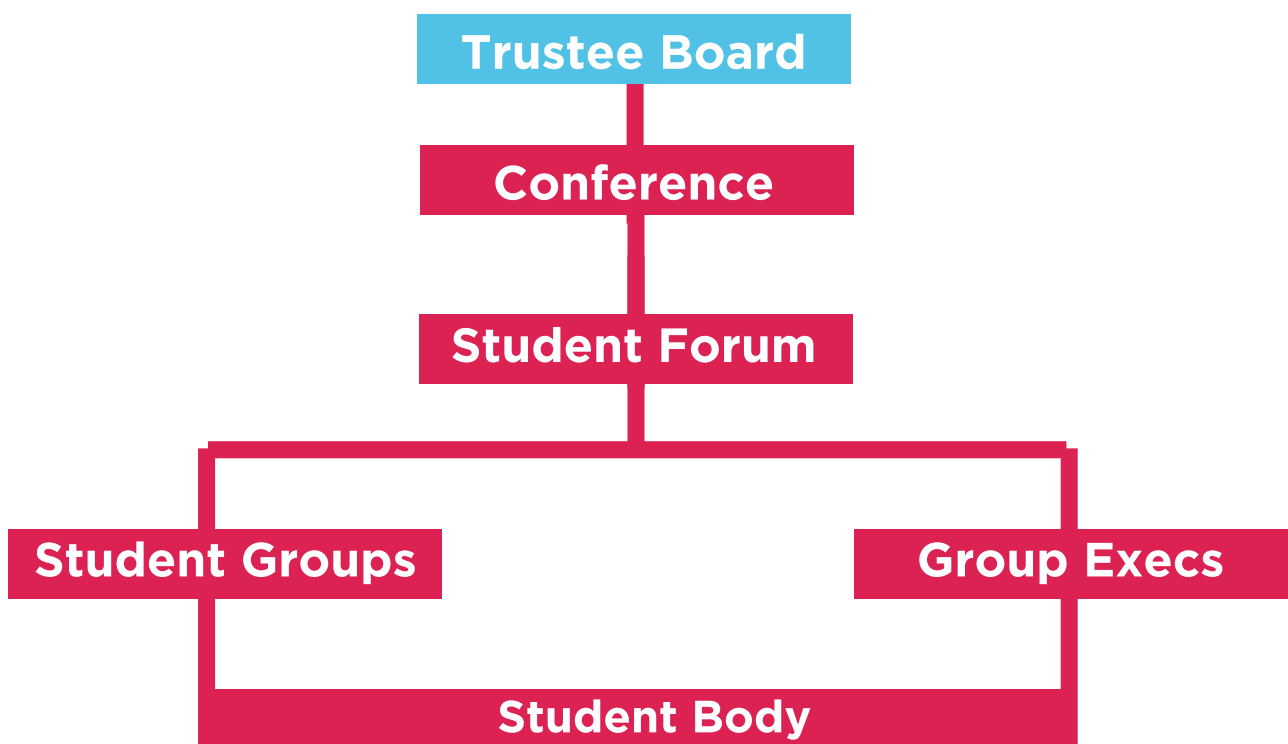
The aim of any democratic system should be about relevance, effectiveness and harnessing an ability to act on the outcomes of a process. Unfortunately, it has become very clear to the Students Union that our current democratic structure is no longer relevant or effective. Instead we have a structure that is highly bureaucratic, repetitive, confusing and fundamentally inaccessible to the majority of the student body.

The main outcome that people wanted to see from the review was to strip back the process and make it simpler for more students to get involved and lead change. Furthermore, the review indicated a need for the SU to broaden its engagement and as such the democratic structure proposed in this document ensures considerations are made around Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (EDI).

Model A provides flexibility and increases the power available to members and does so through a structure that will enable more of a consensus to be reached before the decision-making stage. Students have been asking for a structure that makes it easier for them to engage with their union and to be involved in the decisions that impact on their lives – Model A is that structure.

Democratic structures will never be perfect but by adopting the proposed model we can ensure the Students Union is truly representative of its members, and returns to having decision making processes that are democratic.

New Democracy Structure



GLOSSARY

1994 Education Act – an act passed by Parliament that dictates the conduct and governance of Students' Unions.

Abstentions – declining to vote for or against a proposal or motion Annual General Meeting (AGM) – an annual meeting of all Students where the audited account for the previous financial year and a list of affiliations to external organisation are presented for approval.

Articles of Association – written rules about the running of the Union.

Binding Vote – indicates that the outcome of the vote is expected to result in a real-world change or effect

Bye-Laws – the document that sets out the working practices of the Union.

Education Committee – the body of elected representatives that are responsible for representing students in all academic matters.

Equality, Diversity, Inclusion (EDI) – the idea of promoting and accepting the differences between people and ensuring individuals are treated fairly and equally, no matter their race, gender, age, disability, religion/belief or sexual orientation. Furthermore, EDI is about recognising and respecting these differences to create an all-inclusive atmosphere.

Exec – used to refer to elected representatives from each category of student groups.

Faculty Convenors – elected representatives who gather feedback from students across the wider faculty. **Full –Time Officers (FTO)** – the individuals elected to take a coordinating lead on the issues faced by the student body.

Indicative Vote – a non-binding vote that indicates the general feeling of the electorate

Majority Vote – more than half of the votes cast (does not include abstentions)

Manifesto – a declaration of policies and aims that Student Officers make when running for election.

Media

Motion – a document submitted to Union Council that proposes a change to the Union's Policy

National Union of Students (NUS) – an organisation of Students' Unions that aim to champion students to shape the future of education.

Ordinary Member – student members of the Union being students at the UEA and the FTO's.

Part-Time Officers (PTO) – the members elected to be officers of the Union while continuing their studies at the UEA

Policy – these are the statements or ideas that outline the stance the Union has or actions it will/has take(n) on a particular issue.

Portfolio – an individual's responsibility for a particular area of activity.

Referendum – a referendum in which voters express their preference(s).

Preferential Voting System – a voting system in which voter rank options in order of preference

Quorum – the minimum number of members of a committee/meeting that must be present to make the decisions of that meeting valid.

Referendum – a vote in which all ordinary members of the union are entitled to partake.

Trustee Board – the Union's governing body. Responsible for the Union's strategic direction and ensuring the Union's sustainability. The trustees are accountable for all that happens in the Students' Union.