

Strategic Support Briefing

Democratic Reviews

When conducting a review of democracy, students' unions typically spend a lot of time looking at what other places do. However, the clue to finding the answer is in the question, a *democratic* system must reflect the *demos*, the common people, the populace or in this context, their students.

5 fundamental considerations

This Strategic Support Briefing explores five fundamental considerations which students' Unions should ask students to find out what type of democracy they want at their union and in turn allow unions to shape their democratic structures accordingly.

1. Power over what?

Being a democracy means the people hold the power, but what exactly do students want the power over in their union? Currently democracy in students' unions typically gives students the power to create union policy and elect the sabbatical officers who, amongst other things, enact it. However, some students' unions have been experimenting with economic democracy, letting their members set parts of their unions' budget - with great success. So the first question is what do students want power over and how can it be given to them?

2. What is representation?

Democratic students' unions are likely to use representation as a practical means of including their members. However there are at least three types of representation: Interpretive

representation grants representatives the authority to make decisions on behalf of the studentsⁱ whereas enactive representation places a greater emphasis on the representative consulting students and literally re-presenting the multiple views of students rather than making decisions for them. Simulative representation places greater importance on the representatives sharing or replicating the characteristic of those who they represent. Clarifying what type of representation students want is a crucial part of designing a system that reflects their values.

3 Decisions, Decisions?

In very simple terms there are three ways of making a decision, you can vote on it (direct democracy), talk about it (deliberative democracy) or choose someone else to decide (representative democracy). Choosing between the three is also influenced by other preferences, for example interpretive representation is more compatible with representative democracy, simulative with deliberative democracy and enactive with direct democracy. There is also likely to be a sort of trade-off between fair decisions and quality decisions: for example, giving every student a vote regardless of their knowledge of the issue

is arguably the fairest method, but informing a smaller group of students with the knowledge and expertise to debate the issue in depth will arguably produce a higher quality decision.

Crucial to an organisation with a strong commitment to equality is the question of majority rule Vs mutual consensus. Clearly consensus has massive problems in terms of participants using their right to block proposals, however majority rule (by definition) will, over-time, isolate a consistently overruled minority for whom the organisation will begin to lose political legitimacy. A common “solution” to this challenge is to create separate processes for these minorities; however this can also function to sideline their agendas.

4 Student Groups

It is likely that students will need to be grouped together into smaller assemblies in order to feed efficiently into decision-making within your union. Again there are multiple options, should students be grouped around common interest (what they do), identity (who they are), perspective (how they think), a combination of all three or another way entirely. A reasonable first principle would seem to be that these groups should be formed based on how students both perceive themselves and relate to others which must be understood to structure grouping accordingly.

5. Language!

Will Kymlicka argued that, “democratic politics is the politics of the vernacular. The average citizen only feels comfortable debating political issues in their own tongue”. So, if we want to increase the participation our membership then we should consider making their vernacular the official language of engagement. In reality, very few students speak in the language used in students’ union decision-making processes.

When was the last time you heard a student say, “I resolve to go to the library” or “I note it is raining”?

Majority rule will over time, isolate a consistently overruled minority for whom the organisation will begin to lose political legitimacy

If you are considering undertaking a democracy review and would like more information or guidance the please contact James Robertson, Development Consultant:
James.Robertson@nus.org.uk

ⁱ This authority is normally granted through an election