

New Student Representation for a New Union





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White Paper

Presented to Union Council by

The Campaigns and Involvement Officer

On behalf of the Students' Union
Executive

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Foreword

2010 marks a significant milestone in the history of The University of Leicester Students' Union. As ratified by the membership at the AGM held in October 2009, the Union will divide itself into two separate companies. The first, a Company Limited by Guarantee, will contain all of the Union's charitable activities and will be the body that receives the annual block grant from the University. This company will be what the vast majority of the membership will know as "The Students' Union", and will perform all the traditional activities of a Union, such as the Education Unit as well as societies and associations etc. The second will be a wholly-owned subsidiary, A Company Limited by Shares, which will contain all of the Union's trading activity and will rent the building. The profits from the trading company, less an allowance for investment in future developments, will be gifted to "The Union". This may seem unnecessary, but has tremendous tax benefits. In addition, the Union will be registering as a charity and will have to adhere to the guidelines set by the Charities Commission. As a result, the Union's mission statement has had to be rewritten to conform to charity law.

The legal mission of the Union is the "advancement of education of Students at the University of Leicester". Accordingly it is logical that the Union Council, the governing body of the Union, reflects and epitomises this mission. This white paper intends to lay out necessary reforms to bring council to become fully representative. We propose to introduce a new system of governance, which will replace the current system, making student electives more relevant, representative and democratic.

And we propose to introduce a new system that will enable us to take decisions on Union policy and support for student groups and communities in a way that timely, efficient and predictable. These reforms will also improve accountability as part of the new system by strengthening the role Student Officers have in setting strategy both fairly and transparently. This White Paper also sets out proposals for improving and extending student engagement in the system. The fundamental way that Union Council currently operates was established in the around the 1950s and, bar the disillusion of the standing committees, in 2006-07, little has changed since. However, what has changed is the make up of our student body.

Back in the origins of what we would now recognise as a fully functional Students' Union, some sixty years ago, the University's population was made up

of a few thousand undergraduates and a sprinkling of postgraduates, who could all fit into the Percy Gee at one time. Student representation was a much easier task; all students were of a similar demographic and studied on campus, allowing the Union’s activities to be clearly focused towards the needs and wants of the membership. As a result, engagement was high and hence, students were willing to attend councils and the various standing committees. In 2010 we see a much different picture. The University’s population has exponentially increased to a figure of over 20,000 (set to rise by another three thousand by 2013, through the expansion of distance learners), with half of them distance learners (DLs) and 40% postgraduate students. The traditional idea of a student, 18-21 year-old undergraduate, does not make up the majority of the membership and yet little has been done to reform Council to take heed of these changes. This White Paper intends to raise some important questions of student representation at the University of Leicester and outline clear reforms needed to address these issues.

Current State of Student Representation

This section of this White Paper intends to review just how representative the current system of student representation is.

We feel that with the current structure of student council that it is not representative of the student population at the University of Leicester, which certain groups of students suffering from significant underrepresentation. To view the situation more clearly it will be necessary to compare the current membership of Union Council and the actual student population. This shall be broken down in three ways. Firstly, by the ratio of undergraduates to postgraduates. Secondly by the breakdown of the four different colleges. Thirdly by the ratio of on-campus students to part-time and distance learners.

Fig. A

	Council	Population
Social Science	35%	53%
Arts & Law	30%	20%
Science	20%	11%
Medicine	15%	17%

*NB – this table omits students studying in the Institute of Lifelong Learning

Fig. B

	Council	Population
Undergraduate	76%	48%
Postgraduate	24%	50%
Other (Foundation level, etc)	0%	2%

Fig. C

	Council	Population
Full-Time	100%	50%
Part-Time/Distance Learner	0%	50%

*NB – PGCE students are regarded as full-time postgraduates

From the evidence provided it is clear that there is a serious inequality between the composition of Union Council and the actual population of the University. The three clear groups of students that are underrepresented are postgraduates, part-time students and distance learners. As Council currently stands there is no representation for those students who are studying at the University's satellite campuses.

The University currently has a number of satellite campuses, known as *Teaching Centres*. The most notable Teaching Centres are Vaughan College, Northampton College and 128 Regent Road, with the former being by far the largest. These Centres are part of the Institute of Lifelong Learning, and as a result fall outside of the college system that operates within the mainstream courses at the University. Thus, as there are no officers at Union Council for either the portfolio of or elected on a manifesto dedicated to supporting part-time students or those in the Institute of Lifelong Learning, these individuals have no representation, excluding Sabbatical Officers, at Union Council. The outlook is not so bleak for the distance learner, but they still suffer from the same problems.

Most distance learners fall within one of the colleges. For instance, a distance learner student studying for their MBA in Hong Kong will also be member of the College of Social Sciences, so at a basic level they will have some kind of representation at Council. Nevertheless, there is little in the way of provision distance learner, like the part-time students, in terms of what the Students' Union has to offer them. Many of these students are mid-carrier professionals with families etc.

Although some part-time students do get involved with the traditional activities of the Student' Union and join societies and sports team, etc; the vast

majority of these students are not interested in the fact that the Union is building a state-of-the-art nightclub nor how the Freshers' Reb system is operated. However, this is not to say there is nothing that the Union has to offer. There are plenty of fantastic services the Union is involved in which can improve and enhance their student experience whilst studying at the University of Leicester. The key selling point to get these student engaged with the Union is independent academic representation.

These students have the same academic needs that the traditional undergraduate has. No course this or any other University has is perfect, things can always be improved. In fact, some of these students are sometimes far more respective of issues on their course that than those students in their early twenties, as they have greater worldly experience and knowledge and enrol at the University with a greater expectation of what they intend to receive for their money. However, they suffer from the same problems that all typical traditional students have when it comes to addressing any shortfalls on their course of finding it hard to get their voice heard by the University. These problems are amplified if they are studying in the UAE or North America, where they do not have immediate access to their tutor. This is where the Union can play a significant role. The Union, and hence council, needs to step back to its roots and the reasons why it was formed in 1919 – to provide academic representation to the students at the University. However, disengagement with the Union does not also lie with part-time students and distance learners, but there is also a significant problem in trying to reach out to the on-campus postgraduate community. Year on year, the Students' Union struggles to fill the Postgraduate Committee positions on council, and it normally take a bi-election to get the full quota.

The academic strain placed on postgraduates is much greater than for undergraduates, and monopolises their time. Many have time for little else outside of their studies, and it is understanding that they would not want to give up what free time they do have sitting through Union Council meeting and forums that have little relevant to their University experience. Greater focus needs to be placed at council to discuss the academic requirements of students. Over the past academic year only one proposal has been brought forward and debated in council regarding academic issues. We hope that the reforms outlined in this White Paper will address this issue and place greater emphasis on the discussion of educational issues. In addition, we hope that these proposed reforms will seek to prevent ill thought out proposals being sent to council, allowing for more productive and efficient debate. Through these reforms, Council will become more relevant to those students who we have traditionally struggled to engage. Only once the Union and Council become relevant will it provide the incentive for these students to attend meetings and run for positions on council.

3. The Proposed Reforms

This White Paper proposes that we dissolve Union Council in its current form and create a new Student Parliament based on proportional representation.

i. Membership

The new Student Parliament will be made up of representatives from each course within the University of Leicester. Each course will elect a student to represent them at the Parliament who will be known as a MSP (Member of Student Parliament). This will enable the Parliament to mirror the spread of the composition of the population of the University. The additional benefit to this is that it will make the governing body of the Union much more personal, as through the University's departmental mailing list we would be able to contact each student and inform them directly of who represents them at the Parliament, much as we do now with the course rep system.

Each student will then know who to go to over any representative matter, whether their problem is regarding academic issues, sport or their particular society, much like the MP system works at Westminster. We believe that this will create transparency over who each student representative is accountable to, whereas in the current system that is unclear. This will push forward the efficiency of Council, so that the matters discussed at the Parliament are both relevant and contemporary. A second advantage over this system will be the ease with which we can incorporate and include distance learners.

Using very affordable and simple technology an online network can be easily formed where each course can have a discussion board on a Student Parliament portal on the Union's website. Each discussion board will then be moderated by the relevant MSP, who can then spot recurring themes and bring them to attention at Parliament. This is a system employed by the Open University Student Association, which works very well with their large distance learner population of 250,000 students.

The operational logistics of this system can be fine-tuned by a working group if these reforms are passed.

ii. Forums

The reforms will also dissolve all of the current standing committees, with the exception of the Elections and Rules Committee.

- MSPs will be formed into various forums and committees as deemed appropriate by the Parliament.
- Each forum or committee can be attended by any student, with the only requirement that it is chaired by a MSP.

We believe that this will make council more relevant and effective. These forums and committees will be created and dissolved as the Parliament see fit, allowing the Union to operate with a great deal of relevance and flexibility. For instance, this academic year two of the biggest issue to be dealt with by Union Council have been the #80 bus and the closure of German. Under the new proposals a forum would have been created, which any interested student or MSP could have attended, and reported back to the Parliament with any policy proposals that it deemed fit. When the issue it has been tasked with is over the forum is simply dissolved.

iii. Elections and Rules

- The Elections and Rules Committee will remain the only permanent Committee of the new Parliament, as it is essential to the running of any large democratic organisation.
- The Speaker will be elected by the MSPs, in the same way that the Speaker of the Commons in Westminster is elected.