

MICHAELMAS  
**2024**



# Democracy Proposals

Deciding the future of  
student organising  
in Oxford

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In consultation with the Oxford SU Transformation  
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of Trustees



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# Introduction

FROM THE 2024/2025 SABBATICAL OFFICER TEAM

**AFTER 50 YEARS, WE ARE AT AN EXCITING CROSS-ROAD IN WHICH WE CAN CHANGE STUDENT REPRESENTATION AT OXFORD FOR THE BETTER.**

The SU's transformation programme gives us a unique opportunity to re-imagine what change-making feels and looks like within the University sphere.

If we want to be successful in making a meaningful difference in students' lives, and flourish as a Union throughout the next five decades, we must find the best structure to facilitate democracy, student leadership, accountability, transparency, effective organising, constructive discussion, and student involvement at the heart of the SU's activities.

This is a monumental task, which is why you, Oxford students reading this, matter so much- we need your help and input to find the right model, implement it, and evaluate whether it is working.

The number one question that we always get asked is "what actually is the SU?" That's partly because so much of our work happens behind the scenes; but it's also because the SU finds itself facing existential questions - what are we here to do? Should we even be a Students' Union in the traditional sense, in a collegiate and unique university such as Oxford?

In the Oxford tradition, we are now combating this question head-on by flipping it back at you! Different visions of our identity and purpose is what stands behind these democratic models. We are asking you to give us a steer on what might be the answer.

All of us directly benefit from competent and functioning student representation and engagement - so we call on all of you to get involved in creating it.

Sincerely,



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# CONSULTATION PLANNED SCHEDULE

## FIRST READING - MICHAELMAS TERM 2024

At this stage we are looking for broad overarching feedback about which models we should explore in more detail. It is important that whatever comes out of this consultation is deliverable, and that requires us to ensure that have the budget and capacity to deliver it.

## STUDENT CONSULTATION - MICHAELMAS TERM 2024

Week 2-4 PresCom (JCR and MCR presidents); Targeted consultation with Democracy Taskforce, with other taskforces, Campaigns and DivReps depending on interest

Week 5: Wider publication of the proposals with invitation to feed back open submissions.

Week 6: All Student Meeting at which the following will be presented:

- Draft Democratic Models (as below)
- Draft Elections Bye-Laws
- Receive an update regarding proposed Articles of Association

Week 7 - 8: All-student survey asking students to decide between different options.

## GOVERNANCE PROCESSES - MICHAELMAS TERM 2024

31/10: Trustee Board to review proposed democratic models

31/10: Student Life Subcommittee to consult

14/11: Education Committee

15/11: Transformation Subcommittee to consult

13/12: Transformation Subcommittee - feed back student opinion and consult on the SU's democratic future.

16/12: Trustee Board - to make final decision on SU's future focus and purpose.

## SECOND READING - HILARY TERM 2025

By this stage, we will have more detailed and structured versions of the model or models being proposed and which has the most support. This will enable us to move forward with the development of our bye-laws and building resourcing structure around the proposals.

## STUDENT CONSULTATION - HILARY TERM 2025

Christmas Vacation / Before term: announce the SU's student-backed focus on purpose and the development of a corresponding democratic model; announce the sabbatical and other roles open in the elections.

Week 1: Publication of approved elections bye-laws

Week 3-4: Election of new sabbatical officers, community officers, and other office holders as appropriate.

Week 6: All Student Meeting to:

- Receive an update regarding development of democratic models and associated bye-laws
- Consultation on proposed new Articles of Association (subject to legal sign-off)
- Receive a report on the Union's finances

## GOVERNANCE PROCESSES - HILARY TERM 2025

Week TBC: PRAC meeting to scope out funding for proposed models

Week TBC: Student Life Sub-Committee Working Group to review proposed Articles and bye-laws

Week tbc: Transformation Subcommittee & Trustee Board to approve new proposed Articles

Week 12: Draft Bye-Laws to be signed off by University & Union counsel/legal team

## **CONSULTATION**

# **PLANNED SCHEDULE**

### **FINAL READING - TRINITY TERM 2025**

By this point, we should have a clearer idea of which model will be taken forward and have begun scoping the necessary changes required to implement.

### **STUDENT CONSULTATION - TRINITY TERM 2025**

week 6: All Student Meeting to:

- Approve new bye-laws
- Approve new Articles

### **GOVERNANCE PROCESSES - TRINITY TERM 2025**

Transformation Subcommittee & Trustee Board to approve budget & resourcing plan

## **IMPLEMENTATION**

# **PLANNED SCHEDULE**

The outcome of this consultation will have a wide-ranging impact on the SU, how it works and its purpose. It's important that we take the time to make sure that the decisions that we make are deliverable and delivered well. It is also important to recognise that some of the models require not only the SU to change, but may also impact our partner organisations, associated groups, common rooms and other parts of the University.

It is also important that we follow the governance processes required of us as a membership organisation, charity and as a part of the wider university community.

Some outcomes may be implemented as we go along, for example the reintroduction of a fourth sabbatical officer, and the election of relevant post holders depending on the chosen democratic model.

Whatever comes out of this consultation will also be subject to ongoing review whilst we work out what works and what doesn't.

# The Key Question

What is your vision for the student movement in Oxford?



**Completely  
separate**

Relationship with common rooms

**Fully  
ingrained**



## **A Union of Students**

A direct democracy model in which we engage with students as students directly, through an enhanced insight function and opening involvement for everyone, building a university-wide community, while colleges and common rooms remain separate.

## **The Students' Senate**

A collegiate representative democracy model in which we engage with students by having them elect college-based student senators to liaise between students and the SU, in a way that is independent but cooperative with common rooms.

## **Conference of Common Rooms**

A federative model in which our constituent members are common rooms, and we become a service-based organisation which primarily focuses on supporting their work and in which common room committees determine the SU's priorities and positions.

# A Union of Students

## Towards direct democracy



### GOAL

To open direct voice in the SU to all willing students and reliably represent all students' views directly



### VISION

An organisation in which students as students all come together to form collective views

<b>Components</b>	President and vice presidents, community officers, all-student meetings, referenda or all-student votes, focus groups and pulse surveys.
<b>Assembly</b>	The assembly is the All Student Meeting, which happens once a term in which every student who wishes to can attend. Decisions by the ASM on key matters will be subject to quoracy and may need to be verified with a referendum.
<b>Executive</b>	Sabbatical Officers can be any students and are elected by all students. They work to channel student voice based on submissions that use research and insight to evidence what students think. They would consist of four Sabbatical Officers, the remits of which are to be decided and reviewed regularly.
<b>Minoritised communities</b>	Directly-elected Community Officers work to bring together all relevant groups and stakeholders in their community and organise them towards the SU's campaigning goals and to feed in insight to its representation work. They directly represent minoritised students at the SU's executive.
<b>Accountability</b>	The SU would strive to the highest level of transparency it can achieve, with a report on its financials and activities, as well as an impact report, shared with all students once a year.
<b>Change making</b>	The SU would focus just on University-level representation and building University-level community, while colleges would remain common rooms' remit. This would mean there would be enhanced focus on launching university-wide campaigns and supporting inter-collegiate societies.

Direct democracy models work well in many Universities, such as most recently at Exeter. They allow for a flexibility, vibrance, and transparency that are unparalleled. But should the Collegiate University have an SU that does not reflect this structure?

# Direct Democracy

## What to consider about this model



### Strengths

The advantages of this model

The direct-democracy model is relatively simple to implement and it relies on pre-existing methods. It allows any student to get involved with the SU if they want to, while formal continuous roles are concentrated among few, which will lead to flexibility.



### Weaknesses

The disadvantages

This model requires high levels of general engagement. Low engagement from the mainstream student body could mean the SU becomes detached, or taken over by highly-engaged fringe groups, making it unrepresentative of all students.



### Opportunities

Why this suits Oxford

The model suits the arena the SU works in - the University-level - and it can allow the SU to use its position to build university-level identity and belonging by engaging student university societies, common rooms & campaigning on shared common issues.

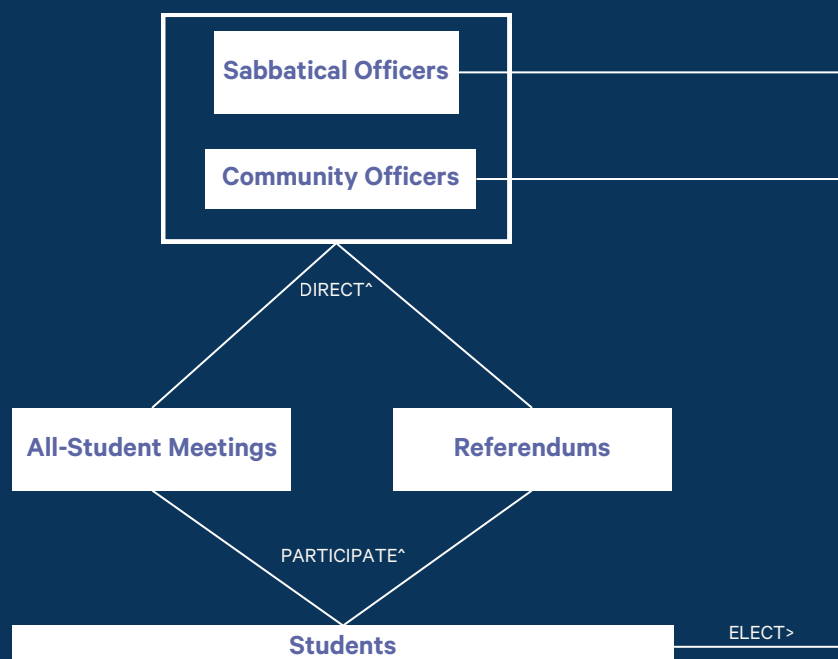


### Threats

Why this may not suit Oxford

The model does not necessarily reflect the collegiate nature of Oxford, which can become a problem with the college experience being so meaningful for many students and common rooms being hubs of engagement.

## MAP OF THE MODEL





# FAQ

## A Union of Students

**What happens if the SU receives low engagement?**

This model relies on the SU being great at direct engagement, as well as engaging with existing structures and communities such as inter-collegiate societies. But eventually only those that turn out get to make the decisions - a common feature of any member-led organisation.

**How do you make sure students who get involved represent the majority of the student body?**

There are checks and balances that can be used to make sure key decisions get wide-spread support, beyond just the majority of the all-student meeting. This can happen by asking for consensus from the meeting, informing it with survey and insight data, and mandating all-student votes on crucial topics. Community Officers will play a key role in ensuring decisions are inclusive.

**What would this model's relationship with common rooms look like?**

This model would clarify the SU's democratic relationship with common rooms by ending it - they would be parallel organisation and can work as partners, but the SU would not be formally accountable to common rooms or vice versa. Common rooms still play a key role in building community and we would still explore providing key support services directly to common rooms.

**What ensures colleges' accountability to students and an equitable college experience?**

This would depend on common rooms as separate organisations working to represent students in their colleges and campaigning for college-specific issues. Using our insight & data, the SU would provide toolkits and information to strengthen common room negotiating power within individual colleges. Cross-cutting or over-arching issues would be in the remit of the SU, and it would continue to represent students at the Conference of Colleges for that purpose.

**Who carries out decision making in practice in this model?**

Day-to-day decision making would be carried out by the SU's executive, primarily its sabbatical officers as democratically elected representatives of the students, and with the backing of data and insight on what students think. More major or important decisions and policies will be regularly taken to all students to decide upon.

**How do we make sure everyone is heard in this model?**

The model is unique in that it allows anyone to participate in the democratic process directly, beyond just annual voting for representatives. Groups that are particularly impacted by certain decisions would be particularly consulted - for example, if a policy mostly has implication on one minority group, that group would be consulted via the Community Officers - not all students.

## Model B:

# Conference of Common Rooms

## Towards a confederation



### GOAL

To ingrain common rooms in all our work and decision making, and support theirs



### VISION

We will create one union for one university by bringing together the college communities

<b>Components</b>	Chair and vice chairs, conference of common rooms, rep committees.
<b>Assembly</b>	The Conference of Common Rooms will be the primary body, including all common room Presidents, only meeting once a term. It will serve as a platform to consult with each other as autonomous bodies and share best practices, as well as agree by consensus on shared priorities and manage committee representation.
<b>Executive</b>	Four elected Chairs and vice-chairs, acting as sabbatical officers. Their role is to channel the views of conference in university committees and set the agenda of conference.
<b>Minoritised communities</b>	Represented by rep committees, in which all the college reps come together and meet once a term, electing an annual chair, and work to share best practices, feed in to committee and conference work, as well as organise for campaigning on their key priorities.
<b>Accountability</b>	The Chair and Vice Chairs report to the common room Presidents at conference, which oversees and directs the organisation. Common room Presidents are then accountable to students at their common rooms.
<b>Change making</b>	The CCR staff secretariat support would focus on training and supporting common room committees and offering them resources to improve college experience. The CCR itself would be a space to bring all common rooms together for meaningful collective action.

The CCR model reflects Oxford's governance system and method, and represents a return to our origins as an organisation of common rooms - but is an umbrella capacity-building organisation really still a students' union?

# Confederation

## What to consider about this model



### Strengths

The advantages of this model

We know that common rooms are where students, particularly undergraduate students, build community first and foremost. This model does not create new representative structures or duplicate existing work, and it gives common rooms direct control over how students are represented to the University.



### Weaknesses

The disadvantages

The model suffers from a plurality of voices and structures - if consensus can't be achieved then there would be a lack of unified voice, and complicated and varied governance would require a high level of resources. We also know that not all students feel that their common room represents them.



### Opportunities

Why this suits Oxford

The model matches the collegiate structure and Oxford's governance system. Common rooms represent much smaller, closer knit communities which makes community organising much simpler. More targeted, tailored and focused support could be provided by the CCR secretariat.

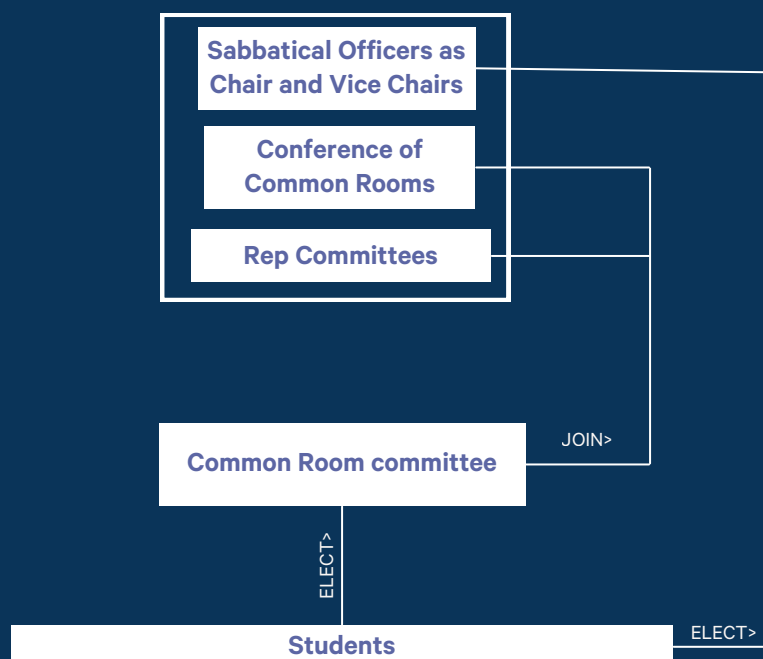


### Threats

Why this does not suit Oxford

Common room Presidents are currently over-burdened and unpaid, making additional participation difficult. Academic representation would be more difficult in a college-based structure and it doesn't acknowledge the divisional structure. Marginalised students may also need to work harder to have their voices heard.

## MAP OF THE MODEL



# FAQ

## Conference of Common Rooms

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**Would this still be a  
Students' Union?**

The constituent members of this model are common rooms, not students, and so this is not a Students' Union in its meaning in the 1994 Higher Education Act - but it can still carry out student representation all the same.

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**What is this model  
based on?**

This model is based on the Conference of Colleges model (<http://www.confcoll.ox.ac.uk>), which is a “forum for the Colleges of the University of Oxford to deal with matters of shared interest and common purpose, and a voice for college interests within the University community”. It's capacity-building relationship with common rooms resembles the NUS Charity with SUs (while NUS UK is more similar to the direct democracy model).

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**What are common  
rooms' formal status in  
this model?**

Common rooms adopt varied different legal configurations - some see themselves as charities and some as unincorporated associations, and only some define themselves as students' unions in its meaning in the 1994 Higher Education Act. However, this wouldn't matter for the CCR model, which regards them all as autonomous - the important consideration is that they are representatives of their college community.

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**How does this work for  
postgraduate students?**

The model does not capture departmental communities directly, which is Postgraduate students more central group - but they would still be represented by their MCR committees in this model.

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**What about non-  
matriculated students?**

The non-matriculated students would be represented in this model by two directly elected representatives at the undergraduate and postgraduate level, who will attend the Conference as full members.

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**How does committee  
representation work in  
this model?**

The Sabbatical Chair and Vice Chairs would carry out most of the University committee representation work, as full-time employees with the legitimacy of an all-student vote, similarly to the Chair and Vice Chair of Conference of Colleges. However, the different JCR and MCR Presidents, and chairs of the rep committees, may be supported in taking on committee service if they wish to do so.

# The Students' Senate

Collegiate but independent



## GOAL

To reliably represent the student voice in a collegiate and diverse institution



## VISION

Representatives share their college community's views in decision-making but take collective responsibility for upholding SU policy

<b>Components</b>	Sabbatical Officers, Student Senators, a Student Senate and Community Officers
<b>Students as members of common rooms, and members of the SU</b>	Common rooms would continue to exist autonomously, and the SU would continue to provide infrastructure support. Students would continue to hold dual membership of both the SU and their common room
<b>Assembly</b>	The Students' Senate would be the primary body, with an UG and a PG Student Senator elected at every college. They then both represent their college community to the SU and represent the SU to their college community as its ambassador.
<b>Executive</b>	Four sabbatical officers lead the senate, set its agenda, and represent its views in committee meetings at University-level.
<b>Minoritised Communities</b>	Represented by part-time Community Officers elected by self-declared community members in the annual elections to represent minority identities within the Senate; and carry out community organising by engaging different relevant stakeholders. Matters that uniquely affect these minority groups would be the remit of the relevant Community Officer, and would have options for ensuring that minority views are specifically considered in Senate decision-making.
<b>Accountability</b>	The Students' Senate directs and oversees the organisation, in consultation with the Trustee Board. The Sabbatical Officers are accountable to the Students' Senate. Student Senators are accountable to their constituents and to the rules and obligations of being an SU Representative and Trustee.
<b>Change making</b>	The Students' Senate model allows for quick decision making on the students' views by debate and vote in the Senate. Campaigns to back these can then be empowered by the work of the Senators within the Senate and as its representatives in the different colleges.

This hybrid model represents a more traditional representative democracy model that has been tried and tested at many SUs, but also still matches the collegiate structure of Oxford. But is it different enough from the SU's past models to work differently?



# Representative Democracy

## What to consider about this model



### Strengths

The advantages of this model

The model combines the strengths of two other approaches to become a hybrid model, and allows for quick decision making to create democratic legitimacy. It will create a prestigious platform for the most eager volunteers, who are then accountable both to voters and to the organisation.



### Weaknesses

The disadvantages

The models' democratic legitimacy relies on strong engagement and in its absence it would struggle to be representative. The model potentially duplicates work and representative positions existing at common rooms.



### Opportunities

Why this suits Oxford

The model can empower the organisation by harnessing the Student Senators' work to its benefit, as they represent their voters and can be its ambassadors in their community. This model creates a two-way line of communication with every college community.

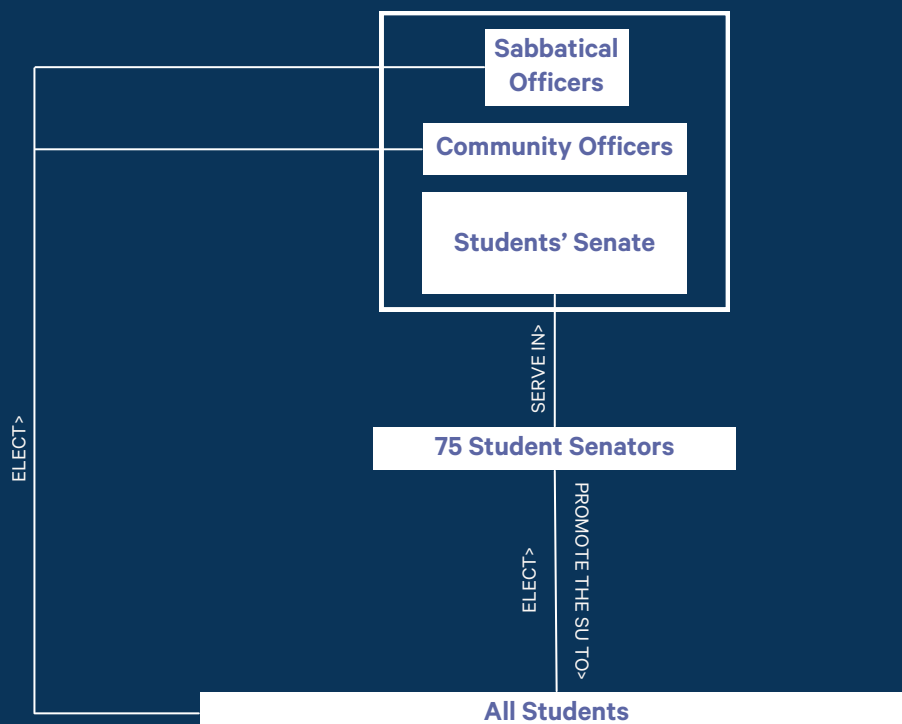


### Threats

Why this does not suit Oxford

Students may not be convinced the organisation matters for them, making the Senate activity seem detached. Inactivity by Student Senators can lead to stasis or loss of legitimacy, while misconduct by Student Senators may tarnish the whole organisation.

## MAP OF THE MODEL



# FAQ

## The Students' Senate

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**What is the role of sabbatical officers within the senate?**

The role of a sabbatical officer is to set the agenda for and chair Student Senate meetings, work with student senators to promote it in the different colleges, and represent its views to the University on the different committees (or coordinate committee service by Student Senators where appropriate).

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**Will the Students' Senate always be representative?**

The model relies on trust in representative democracy - student senators are elected by students and are accountable to them, and so will represent their views. Some student senators may be over-ruled on some matters by the majority - that is an inherent part of representative democracy. Minoritised students will be represented via the community officer roles, who can veto policy with an equality impact.

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**What is the role of senators and the senate?**

Students' senators role is three-fold: 1. to represent their college (UG/PG) community's views to the Students' Senate. 2. To be the Students' Senate ambassadors to their college, promoting the Senate among students and coordinating between the common room committees and college authorities. 3. To support the work of the Students' Senate by contributing to debates and drafting of policy, and taking on committee service work.

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**Who are student senators accountable to?**

Student senators have two-sided accountability - to the student community which elected them, and which they'll need to engage, be transparent to, and face the potential of a no-confidence vote from; and to the Students' Senate, which may set rules and obligations on policy, conduct and behaviour that student senators must follow.

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**How do community officers fit into this model exactly?**

Community officers would be elected with the sabbatical officers by all students who identify with the relevant community. Their work is to champion these identities within the Students' Senate. They liaise between it and different stakeholders, such as societies and common room rep networks, and work with the sabbatical officers to bring the community together to carry out community organising. They are not voting members of the Students' Senate but can attend meetings and can veto proposals that have a particular impact on their community.

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**How do common rooms fit into this?**

Common rooms would be separate partners in this model, but important ones. Many student senators may also be common room committee members and in any way they are expected to work and coordinate with their common room, as well as support their college-level work.

## HOW ARE THESE DIFFERENT?

### DIRECT DEMOCRACY VS STUDENT COUNCIL

**Similarity:**

Our previous democratic model had provisions allowing a call for a referenda and even required it in some cases. This has been used as recently as the 21/22 AY for a vote on exam wear. The model also required an annual all-members meeting.

**But the important difference:**

In the direct democracy model every assembly meeting is open to all students; all-student votes would be carried out much more frequently; and there wouldn't be as much emphasis on work with common rooms.



### CONFERENCE OF COMMON ROOMS VS STUDENT COUNCIL

**Similarity:**

The SU often described itself as a confederation and placed emphasis on common rooms as key stakeholders. Student Council relied on common rooms to send their representatives, at times this being the president.

**But the important difference:**

The CCR model would place an emphasis on the presidents or, in exceptional cases, the vice presidents being the common room representatives. The Conference would be much more focused in its agenda, and would offer common rooms value by the sharing of best practices. Marginalised groups would be represented in separate committees based on common room reps - so the main assembly retains democratic legitimacy, while efforts at liberation are inherently joined up with the common rooms. The SU constituent members would not be students, but rather common rooms, and it would be much more closely aligned with them.



### STUDENTS' SENATE VS STUDENT COUNCIL

**Similarity:**

Some common rooms elected common room committee members in order to serve as representatives to the SU, so the student council model resembled representative democracy in that way.

**But the important difference:**

In this model, student senators are part of the SU, not the common rooms. This means that while they are accountable to their voters at the college, they are also accountable to the SU on good attendance and proper conduct. While their role would involve representing students at their college to the SU, it would also involve promoting the SU to these students, liaising with the common room committee and college, and more generally acting as our ambassadors in their college, as well as contributing to SU activity of all kinds. Thus, they would be expected to not only scrutinize the SU but also be actively involved in its work as volunteers.



# OVERARCHING RECOMMENDATIONS TO CONSIDER

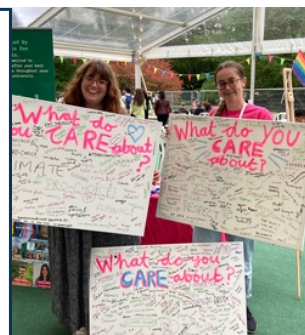
## FOUR SABBATICAL OFFICERS

We now have the ability to support and fund again an additional sabbatical officer role. We are open to your feedback about what needs to be considered as part of the development of the four sabbatical officer roles. Your feedback will go towards building the roles to be elected during the Hilary Term elections 2025.



## LONG-TERM PRIORITIES

Change-making in Oxford requires persistence and patience. We can not go on with the SU changing focus every year to accommodate short-term manifesto pledges and projects. Instead, these democratic structures - combined with insight - should set long-term broad priorities, and sabbatical officers should campaign in elections on how their skill and experience can contribute to these.



## MINORITISED STUDENTS' REPRESENTATION

It is paramount that all student voices are reflected in the work of the SU. As part of these proposals, we are proposing to re-introduce part-time Community Officers, elected to the role with the sabbatical officers on a part-time basis to work with existing stakeholders to help foster a sense of belonging at Oxford SU for everyone.

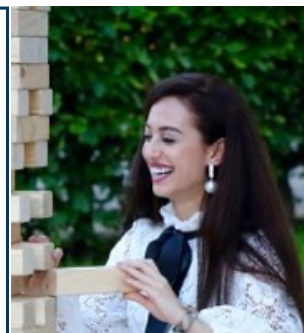


## BYE-LAWS REVIEW

# OTHER KEY DECISIONS FOR INCLUSION IN BYE-LAWS

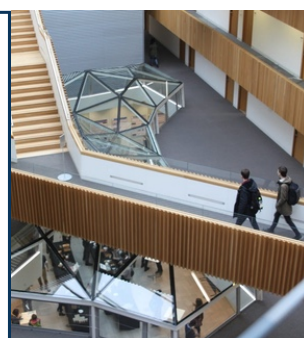
### STUDENT AND EXTERNAL TRUSTEES

The new bye-laws and articles will retain a student majority on the Board. With 4 sabbatical trustees, up to six student trustees and up to six external trustees. The responsibilities of the Board mean that skills and diversity should be the key driver in deciding who our Board members should be, and they will be recruited in line with organisational need.



### POLICY AND THE TRUSTEE BOARD

In the past, tensions arose due to needless friction between the Student Council passing policies that the Board of Trustees often vetoed due to the charity's legal, financial, and reputational considerations. Policies should thus reflect the students' position on key issues, not the day-to-day running of the organisation, and should be reviewed by the Board of Trustees before being debated.



### NO-CONFIDENCE VOTES

There is a significant risk that a small minority of students are able to vote against a sabbatical officer, and that this would lead to challenges in how they are treated as employees. There is also a lack of accountability measures that are short of a no-confidence vote. We propose these are replaced by increased transparency and votes of censure on specific issues by the chosen assembly model, and for the Board of Trustees to address exceptional issues with trustees if they arise.



### STUDENT LEADERSHIP

We must make sure the organisation is meaningfully led by students. This means clarifying what it means to be truly student-led; and clarifying the relationship between organisational governance and political and democratic decision-making.





## FOR INFORMATION

# DECISIONS TAKEN BY THE BOARD

### EXTERNAL RETURNING OFFICER

It is standard practice in SUs across the country to have the NUS provide a professional, external returning officer for elections. This makes sure decisions are impartial and consistent, democratic, free and fair and removes the pressure on elected students.



### REMOVING THE LIMIT ON OFFICER TERMS

The Education Act 1994 allows for sabbatical officers of the students' union to serve two terms, consecutively or non-consecutively. Oxford SU is one of the only Unions in the country the limits terms to 1 year. The Transformation Report recommended lifting this limit, which has been approved by the Trustee Board for implementation in 25/26.



### MEMBER CODE OF CONDUCT

Oxford SU doesn't currently have a member code of conduct which applies to all members. This is a requirement for membership organisations who are also charities and will be developed as part of the ongoing review of the Articles. It will apply to all members of the Union but will largely relate to those who hold representative positions within the SU, outside of general terms of membership.



### NEW ARTICLES OF ASSOCIATION

As part of the quinquennial review of the Articles of Association required by the Education Act 1994, new Articles are being written and proposed. We will retain as many of the pre-existing elements of the Articles as possible except moving the majority of the democratic decision making into the bye-laws.



## **THE CONSULTATION**

# **WHAT DO WE WANT TO KNOW FROM YOU?**

**WHICH MODEL DO YOU THINK WOULD WORK BEST?**

**WHAT DO YOU THINK WILL BE THE BARRIERS TO SUCCESS?**

**WHAT DO YOU THINK THE FOUR OFFICER ROLES SHOULD INCLUDE?**

**DO YOU HAVE ANY THOUGHTS ABOUT REPRESENTATION OF MINORITISED GROUPS?**

**IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE YOU WANT TO TELL US?**

## **IT'S UP TO YOU!**

**THIS DOCUMENT OUTLINES PROPOSALS, AND THEY ARE JUST PROPOSALS - FOR YOUR CONSIDERATION AS A STUDENT. MAKE SURE TO SHARE WITH US YOUR OPINION TO SHAPE THE FINAL RESULT!**

**COME TO THE ALL STUDENT MEETING ON 21/11 AT 6PM IN THE TOWN HALL TO ASK QUESTIONS AND VOICE YOUR OPINION! TICKETS ARE AVAILABLE HERE:  
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