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The Democracy Review is building a better SU for all of us

When it comes to SU governance, I'm a bit of a sceptic. In the past three years of covering SU news in some capacity or the other, I still don't know what the SU is really meant to accomplish apart from helping societies run events and providing drinks at Tuns. Josie Stephens and Faiso Kadiye, our current General Secretary and Community and Welfare Officer respectively, believe that it has potential to work better than before: that's where the Democracy Review comes in.

The Democracy Review is the SU's programme to reform the structure of the SU and how it operates to make it more representative and inclusive of students at LSE. As it stands, "Students' Union democracy has been the same for the last 10 years, and since then we've had Brexit, we've had a pandemic ... life has changed", said Stephens, who's leading this project alongside Kadiye. The pandemic was a major roadblock - the review was set to take place during the 2019/20 academic year, but online learning had a massive impact on student engagement.

"It requires a lot of time and money as well, there's a lot of staff working on it", according to Stephens. Alongside her and Kadiye, the Democracy Review has staff from the Student Voice team, Representation team, and Marketing and Communications promoting and overseeing a survey, focus groups, and the centrepiece of the campaign: the Democracy Summit.

"So twenty-four students who have been randomly selected as a representative sample of the overall LSE population, will come together for this and we explain how the SU works," Kadiye says. Stephens and Kadiye are conscious of the fact that twenty-four students is quite a small number for the purpose of representing the demographics of the student body, which is why the summit was open to all students who would like to attend and share their experiences and the measures they think are necessary.

"We have experts and people with lived experiences coming in [to speak to them]. For example, I could come in as like a person with lived experience, as a PTO last year and a Sabbatical Officer this year. I can sort of discuss my experience and what I've seen in my role. And they'll consider the issues that come up and weigh our options. They do a jury-style vote, it's very deliberative and democratic." The recommendations that these students come up with will be supplemented by what the SU learns through its focus groups and the survey they launched, which has gotten over 400 responses.

The summit itself was three days, split over a period of three weeks. Its final day took place on 23 March, and all recommendations will be finalised and presented to the SU's Sabbatical Officers, Trustee Board, the LSE Directorate, Dame Minouche Shafik herself, and other key stakeholders at LSE. It's also open to students, with both Stephens and Kadiye strongly encouraging people to attend. However, this is only the start of the process. "The proposal will go to a Student Members' Meeting (previously known as UGMs), as a motion, and then students will have to vote on whether we should implement the proposal that comes out of the Democracy Review," said Stephens.

"After that, it will go to a special Trustee Board meeting in April. It's where the trustees can then offer feedback, discuss it, ask questions. It then might go back to a Student Members' Meeting, if it's amended at all, and we'll have to get another vote for that. And then it will finally go to the Trustee Board in June." It is also worth noting that the proposal's recommendations will not be implemented until 2023, as the SU faces a major restructuring that will require significant time and resources.

SU democracy hasn't been working for students for a while - at least since I've been at LSE. At the Student Members' Meetings this year, not a single motion has been raised for LSE's student community to vote on. Kadiye and Stephens believe that the blame lies with the massive disruption caused by Covid. "Last year, there was a lot of anger and frustration, and the Sabbatical Officer team had to be so focused on the pandemic. And now I think, students want to just get back to normal life," said Stephens. "I mean, they've all got a lot going on! But it is a missed opportunity, ultimately, because people then don't know what we can do, and it's the only place to really hold us to account." With hardly any student attendance at these meetings, it's nearly impossible to fully engage with the work of the Sabbatical Officers and Part Time Officers (PTOs). "If there was a Student Members' Meeting and two hundred people show up and are like, "Josie, what have you done this week? Where is that money going?", we actually have stuff to tell people!", joked Stephens.

Both of them are hopeful that the Democracy Summit will help the SU figure out a different approach to engaging students. However, some structural problems are more challenging: postgraduate engagement, for example. The challenge that the SU faces is that the Postgraduate Officer is in a "disadvantaged position" by default. "They start in November, do induction, and then only have two and a half weeks of work," said Kadiye. Postgraduate officers must do all of this while settling into life at LSE and studying full-time. Stephens also fears the misconception that the four undergraduate Sabbatical Officers work primarily for undergraduates, while postgraduate students must all go to their representative. "It puts postgraduate students off from running for the other Sabbatical Officer positions. I don't think there's ever been a postgraduate Gen Sec, in about 30 years."

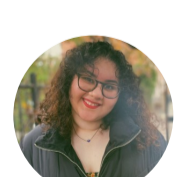
In terms of SU leadership, PTOs play an integral role to many of the campaigns the SU runs. However, as a team of unpaid volunteers, I've always wondered how they manage the burn-out that seems to be a part of the job. As a woman of colour, I also recognise how easy it is to be tokenised. When asked about this, Kadiye, who was the Anti-Racism Officer last year, echoes these concerns. "Sometimes you take on a lot as a PTO. If you want something done, you kind of have to do it yourself," she said. "You're obviously still a student at LSE, and you're deciding what events to run and what room bookings are all about. So you can be really tired and get so burnt out. I think with some of the liberation roles as well, it can feel like it's all on you. If you're not going to do it, no one's going to."

Both of them are excited about what the Democracy Review will tell us about how the SU can be reshaped, but also the potential it has to impact other students' unions. The SU has also had two academic collaborators working on the project alongside them, Prof Simon Pek and Dr. Jeffrey Kennedy. Kennedy, who is an Assistant Professor in Criminal Law at QMUL, believes that this will bring "democratic innovation" to the university. "... [It] can offer a variety of important lessons for invigorating student democracy across the sector as a whole. We're really excited to have the opportunity to observe how this process plays out and to interview the people who are experiencing it firsthand."

"We've already had interest from other universities and students," said Stephens. They want to know about the findings, because this could be quite a pioneering move. We might come up with a structure that then goes on to be what other students' unions transition to, because the perennial issue of students' unions is that they don't necessarily represent all of their students."

"The bottom line is that it's going to make the Students' Union better, it's going to be more representative. It's been long enough."

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Angbeen Abbas

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