

How should decisions be made in your LSESU?

Introduction

Between January and March of Lent Term 2015, a survey was carried out as part of the democracy consultation led by General Secretary Nona Buckley-Irvine.

77 people completed the survey on how decisions should be made in LSESU. The majority of these were anonymous; however 35 people left their email addresses, asking to be kept up-to-date about the results of the survey.

The survey was promoted online, given out at UGMs and also at an event held to discuss possible changes to democracy. Four people attended this event, at which former General Secretary Amanda Hart spoke about the changes that happened while she was an Officer and why student activism is so important. This aimed at showing students why their union is important and inspiring them to have their say on how the union can be more democratic, transparent and accountable. A blog about the event was then released as a way to further promote the survey.

Nona also held a lunchtime drop-in session, to which all members of national/cultural societies were invited via a tailored email, but unfortunately no students attended this.

The survey featured nine questions, seven of which were specifically concerned with finding out how students think decisions should be made in their union. The remaining questions asked for contact details and for students' views on introducing a full-time Postgraduate Officer. Rather than suggesting specific types of democratic process or systems of governance, the survey focused on the features that should be present in any decision-making system, for example, asking students whether they value common identity or common perspectives more. This was in order to reduce the possibility of bias from students who had pre-conceived ideas about a student council or other decision-making bodies and/or are strong supporters of the UGM from simply promoting their views on this.

Analysis

Question 1 gave students an opportunity to leave their email address.

Students were then asked to rate how well represented they felt on a scale of 1 - 5, with 1 being not at all and 5 being a lot.

The weighted average was 3, showing that participants feel that LSESU represents them to some extent but not completely. However, this is far lower than participants from different students' union who took part in the NUS survey on which this survey is based. 23% of respondents in NUS' version indicated that they felt very well represented by their Union, choosing 5 as their answer. This compares to just 11% of LSE students.

For question 3, students were asked how comfortable they you feel taking part in the following processes to become a decision-maker. Again, students had to rate how comfortable they would feel on a scale of 1 - 5, with 1 being not at all and 5 being a lot. The weighted averages were as follows:

- a. Randomly selected/invited, e.g. as with a jury - **3.5**
- b. Interviewed, e.g. as for a job - **3.3**
- c. Elected by your peers - **3.5**

We can see that students feel reasonably comfortable with all these processes - none stands out particularly over the others. For c, the highest number of respondents (28) selected 5, indicating that they feel very comfortable with being elected. In NUS' survey, there was a marked difference between how comfortable students felt with these different processes. 73% felt comfortable being interviewed, compared to just 48% running for election. Interestingly, at LSESU, students rated their level of comfort as higher when being elected by their peers compared to being interviewed.

Question 4:

Do you want to participate in the following?	
a. Identifying issues to be addressed by LSESU?	
Yes	60 (79%)
No	16 (21%)
b. Analysing different solutions to these issues?	
Yes	59 (78%)
No	17 (22%)
c. Deciding which solutions to implement?	
Yes	62 (81%)
No	13 (18%)
d. Implementing the solutions and feeding this back to the whole student-body?	
Yes	45 (60%)
No	29 (40%)

The majority of respondents answered yes to each question, demonstrating that they want to be actively involved in the way that decisions are made. The lowest percentage who answered yes was to the question on implementing solutions and feeding this back to the student body, however an impressively high 60% of students still wish to be part of this.

Respondents were then asked: *If a group is a collective of individuals who are connected with each other in ways that are relevant to them, how do you think students should be grouped so that they are best represented when decisions are being made?*

- a. *Common interests*
- b. *Common perspectives*
- c. *Common identity*
- d. *Other (please specify)*

The most popular answer was common interests, with 35 respondents (70%), followed by b. with 24 (35%) and c. 10 (15%). Again, this differed significantly to the NUS survey, in which a. received 29.6%, b. 52.7% and c. 15%. Comments included:

'Why group students? Have direct participation with an Exec comprising Liberation officers amongst others. Also these three things aren't mutually exclusive at all: identity drives perspective and also interest.'

'Of course, because a few people are elected from this collective of individuals, it is their responsibility to also sometimes take decisions which are ethical and just, even if they are not perceived to be in the

common interest for the short term. An additional responsibility is then to articulate why that particular decision might be better than short term populism or majoritarianism.'

'Cultural background'

'common goals and outcomes'

'The three options above all interrelate. I imagine there is a high degree of correlation between common identities, perspectives and interests...'

The comments on identity driving interest and perspective and the three being inter-related are valid, however this gives us an idea of how LSE students group themselves and therefore the structures through which they would like decisions to be made. For example, the fact that they rate common interests most highly suggests that they would prefer to participate in decision-making processes through clubs and societies rather than through Liberation groups.

Question 6:

Which method(s) do you think should be used to make decisions within LSESU? Please choose as many as you like.		
	Absolute respondents	Percentage of respondents <i>(does not add up to 100 as participants could select as many responses as they wished)</i>
Campus-wide ballots in which all students can vote	61	79%
Meetings open to all students	46	60%
Online fora	36	47%
Petitions	28	36%
Focus groups/surveys	26	34%
External experts make decisions	26	34%
Elect students to represent you	38	49%
Juries - where students are randomly selected	27	35%

The single most popular answer was campus-wide ballots, with 61 (79%) respondents selecting this. This is higher than in the NUS survey; although this was also the most popular method here; 69% of students favoured it. Second, meetings open to all, with 46 (60%) participants selecting this option, this is close to the 58% in the NUS survey. Third, elect students to represent you (49%). This option came 8th, with 37% in the NUS survey. Students are less keen on the idea of juries (27), focus groups (26) or 34%, or external experts (26) 34% making decisions. The options got 32% and 41% respectively in NUS' survey, showing that in both cases these options were less popular.

What is particularly interesting is that just 49% of LSE students want decisions to be made by elected representatives, and this is the main way in which decisions on the day-to-day running of the Union are made.

Question 7: From your own experience, how likely, if at all, would you say you are to share the same views as someone who seems to have the same characteristics as you? With 1 being not at all, and 5 being a lot and NA being not a relevant characteristic. The weighted averages (excluding the values for NA) are as follows:

- a. Sexuality - **3**
- b. Ethnicity - **3.1**
- c. Gender - **3**
- d. Disability - **2.8**
- e. Nationality - **3.5**
- f. Mode of study - **3.1**
- g. Level of study - **3.3**
- h. Faith - **2.7**
- i. Where you live - **3**
- j. Age - **3.2**
- k. Socio-economic status/class - **3.1**
- l. Course - **3.1**
- m. Interests - **3.7**

As in question 5, students view shared interests as being the biggest determiner of shared views, rating this at an average of 3.7/5. However there isn't a huge difference between any of the characteristics, with all values clustering around 3. Faith and disability were seen as the least likely to lead to shared views. However some indicated that they hadn't understood the question.

Three students also suggested that political views are relevant in determining shared views.

In question 8, 37% (28) of students answered that the Postgraduate Students' Officer should be full-time, however the majority, 41%, or 31 respondents answered that they don't have a preference either way. Comments included:

<i>'There should be 2, one full time, one part time so that one works on the feedback continuously while the other has personal experience and feedback'</i>
<i>'Postgrads make up half of the LSE community and the vast majority of the fees paid by students - they should have the opportunity to have a full time paid sabbatical officer.'</i>
<i>'There should be more than one postgraduate office'</i>
<i>'At least the incoming students get to participate in the voting process and feel represented particularly the 1 year post graduates.'</i>
<i>'I'd rather that the Students Officer comes directly from the student body. If it's a full time position then they can't be a student'</i>
<i>'Hard to say'</i>

For the final question, students were asked to leave any other comments about how they would like decisions to be made in LSESU. The following is a selection:

'You need a better website, with much MORE information. The SU website has very little information. Transparency and openness should start there.'

'Nona has taken over the SU with her own goals of being a dictator. Why don't you do something that the students actually want rather than "taking decisions in our best interest." No Nona, not everyone thinks what you think is best for the LSE is true and no you have not improved student life. Just because you have certain views, which you think are issues at LSE does not mean we all share them and you have not represented us accurately...'

'Through the invitation of all members to a meeting to vote, or a voting system; or where individuals are unable to make it, to have a representative who has been chosen by the majority (based on a proposal/personal statement of some link which highlights their interests/perspective)'

'Make presence at UGMs and voting on UGM motions compulsory for a 'student council' formed from 250 people already elected to other roles i.e. course reps, society presidents, club captains, hall presidents, all members of democracy committee and all members of the SU executive. Everyone else retains the right to vote and speak at UGMs but this way every motion meets quoracy and will be decided upon by a diverse range of students. Also, make submitting motions simpler through a single online form and attempt to collect motions for a forthcoming term a few weeks in advance by a targeted push for submissions during the breaks. Furthermore, make democracy committee have a Facebook page for centralised communications regarding motions and any updates so anyone can follow SU politics regardless of their chance of being invited to a Facebook event for a motion.'

'It should be made from bottom up - decisions made and passed at the UGM should take a LSE-wide vote before being decided upon.'

'I think that online voting should be scrapped in favour of voting at UGM's. The awareness of online voting is low, it is unreliable and insecure, it doesn't expose students to both sides of the issue through debate, it isn't exciting and fosters apathy, and large groups of people never participate at all leading to misrepresentation.'

'Staff should make all the decisions.'

'They shouldn't be made at all.'

'You guys seem to have already made your minds up, tbh'

'There is nothing wrong with UGM except for the sloppy, amateurish way in which it is handled. Far too many decisions are made behind closed doors by committees and staff, and sabbs have deliberately downplayed the accountability side of UGM until it has been forgotten.'

'More online voting through social media.'

'Votes are perhaps key moments when democratic decision making is most visible. However, in my opinion, the LSESU should do more work educating and informing the student body about some of the issues on which decisions are taken. Uninformed participation is not as useful. Informed participation may involve lesser numbers, but the quality of decision making will inevitably improve. This kind of work requires long term strategies and grassroots contact amongst wide variety of students. Occasional focus groups and meetings might not be sufficient as ways of involving or educating the student body on what are sometimes complex issues.'

'I think students should be much more involved. It's especially hard for postgrads because they did not vote for the SAB officers, or are not able to give their input over more than one year.'

'I feel like you are doing a great job for at that level'

'By an elected council with the opportunity of a referendum, like the Swiss model'

A number of these comments show strong support from the UGM, but indicate that they feel reform of the voting system is needed. There is also a sense that the democracy processes and procedures need to be better publicised and explained so that students have a more in-depth understanding of how to make change within the current system.

Conclusion

As there is only a small sample size, we cannot take the results of this survey as an entirely accurate indication of how LSE students would like decisions to be made. It is also possible that those who benefit from and happily participate in the current system were more likely to respond to the survey in order to promote their views than students who are already disengaged.

The following key trends can be discerned:

1. Students want to actively participate in decision-making and also in implementing decisions.
2. They feel that elections and votes are the best way to do this and are not keen on focus groups, juries, or experts/staff making decisions. However, just 49% want decisions to be made by elected representatives.
3. They feel that common interests are the characteristic that bind them most strongly with other students, as opposed to identity (e.g. gender, sexuality, faith).
4. They feel that the problem is a lack of understanding among their peers as to how the democracy system works and how to get involved with it, rather than a weakness of the system itself.