

Public Statement of the Oxford Union responding to the Equality & Access Report

Dear Member,

On 17 October 2019, Ebenezer Azamati, a member of the Oxford Union, came to one of our debates. Steps were taken to remove him from the Chamber by force and, subsequently, proceedings were wrongly brought against Mr Azamati alleging violence and dishonesty. Those proceedings were baseless and all allegations were withdrawn. Mr Azamati was rightly cleared of any wrongdoing.

Following this incident, the Oxford Union unreservedly accepted calls for institutional change and commissioned an independent Equality and Access Review to be undertaken by three experienced lawyers. This was to examine our rules, policies, procedures, practices, staff roles and responsibilities, and training requirements, to identify any changes that are legally required, otherwise necessary, or generally desirable.

On 17 June 2021, Doughty Street Chambers presented us with their report entitled “Report of the Equality and Access Review of the Oxford Union”, written after their investigation which included numerous interviews alongside an analysis of our rules and practices. The Report contained 81 recommendations for the Oxford Union to implement. This Report was communicated in full to the trustees of the OLDUT and the Standing Committee, who instructed us to consult with other senior and experienced members of the Oxford Union and members of staff to decide our response to the recommendations. Since then, we have spent time considering both the full Report and the Executive Summary, and, alongside other senior members of the Society, have carefully examined how best to respond to each recommendation. On 8 October, the Standing Committee met again and approved this document. We are pleased to say that we accept 77 recommendations in their entirety, and accept all 81 in some form.

The recommendations have provided us with much useful insight and the valuable opportunity to examine our practices and procedures. There is a real appetite for reform amongst committee members and we look forward to implementing these changes. We understand that alongside implementing immediate changes, we must commit to long term action and will be patient whilst we achieve it. The Oxford Union’s leadership has welcomed this Report and is committed to improvement and change.

In the following pages, we outline the areas of reform we plan to implement, in line with the areas highlighted by the Report. We hope our sincerity and commitment to engaging with the Report’s contents are clear, and we look forward to publishing not only the Executive Summary of the Report, containing all the original recommendations made, but also our responses and plan for the coming months. For those reforms which cannot be implemented imminently, but must be brought to public votes, we look forward to your ongoing support, and hope you are compelled by the arguments presented to you to vote in favour of these valuable changes.

Yours sincerely,

Chengkai Xie

President, MT21

Molly Mantle

President-Elect, MT21

Summary

Our responses to the recommendations themselves fall into several categories. In some instances we are already fulfilling the recommendations, and have been doing so for significant lengths of time. In others, there are technical but real deficiencies in our practices, often relating to the production and publication of policies, codes of conduct, and statements. We will remedy these deficiencies as a matter of urgency. Finally, there are a great many recommendations relating to our culture and procedures that we accept the substance of and will work in a variety of ways to implement; they are important and we are grateful that outside advisors have prompted us to consider extensive change. We have been objective in considering our responses, and at each stage we have used both the list of recommendations in the Executive Summary, alongside the analysis in the full Report.

Section 4: Legal and good practice overview

Section 4 advises how best to use the Equality Act 2010 as a basis for procedure.

We accept all recommendations and commit to further entrenching the provisions laid out in the Equality Act 2010 in our practices and policies, including by introducing impact assessments as a basis for future decision making.

Section 5: Image and culture

Section 5 outlines the importance of creating a welcoming and inclusive culture at the Oxford Union and, particularly, recommends the adoption of a set of core values and expected standards of behaviour. It also makes a number of recommendations concerning image and outreach, for example, the extension of outreach programmes.

We accept all recommendations and will begin by adopting a new statement of expected standards of behaviour, after appropriate consultation. We will explore the best ways to implement and enforce these standards, in conjunction with our new disciplinary reform (see Section 6).

We intend to review our practices and to further develop the most positive parts of our outreach programmes, events and buildings. We will also work to make appropriate changes where necessary.

Section 6: Rules, policies and procedures

Section 6 outlines the importance of clear and accessible rules. It makes a number of recommendations regarding Rule 71 (relating to disciplinary procedures) and also recommends that the Society make its policies more accessible to ordinary members.

We accept all recommendations and have already begun such reforms. In 2020, a Special Committee for Disciplinary Reform was set up to investigate and restructure the disciplinary procedures of the Society. This committee has been working carefully to draft an alternative to Rule 71 to create a more fair and clear procedure, which better lays out categories of misconduct, and is more sensitive to and accessible to members.

We have also committed to reviewing our rules in line with the policies required of societies registered with the University Proctors' Office. We will review relevant policies and put forward a plan to update our rules to increasingly bring them in line with or, where possible beyond, the minimum standards set by the University.

We will publicise policies and accessibility measures more clearly on our website as we redesign it, and around our buildings.

Section 7: Leadership, governance and strategy

Section 7 brings a number of recommendations to make the leadership and governance of the Oxford Union more accessible. These include clear communication about available committee positions, streamlined committees, and more transparent appointment methods. Section 7 also recommends improved scrutiny procedures for officers and paid staff, like the Bursar. Finally, it recommends adopting further strategies to improve our long term outlook on access and equality.

We accept all recommendations which have not already been implemented, subject to where those recommendations would, in the opinion of the Standing Committee, hamper efforts to improve access and equality.

We have already published a "How to Get Involved Handbook" and created a Presidential Support Grant to improve financial access. We will soon begin preparing "handover" documents to better equip committee members for their roles and improve termly handovers.

We also began streamlining the Appointed Committee and the Standing Committee in HT21, and reformed the application process to increase transparency and allow greater scrutiny of the President's decisions by the Returning Officer and other Officers.

We will take steps to modernise and increase the remit of the Access Committee and to implement new oversight systems for employed staff, senior committee members, to further the long term goals of the Society. When hiring our new Bursar, we kept these goals in mind and plan to request that the Audit Committee explore a new scrutiny system of the Bursar and other staff. We will continue our focus on long term reform, including by implementing a clearer long term access and equality strategy.

We did not agree that Liberation Officer positions, for example the Women's Officer and LGBTQIA+ Officer, should be open to all members regardless of identity, as we believe personal identity is a crucial part of representing and advocating for these groups in this role.

Section 8: Complaints and discipline

Section 8 outlines a number of recommendations to improve our complaints procedure.

We accept these recommendations. We have already begun reassessing our complaints procedure to create clearer routes for complaints, and to reduce the involvement of current students in handling complaints. We intend to establish clearer routes for members, staff and independent contractors to complain about, and be held accountable for, conduct breaching expected standards of behaviour, and will work with stakeholders to create an improved policy which is satisfactory to all parties.

Section 9: Training

Section 9 outlines a series of recommendations about the training staff and students should receive to undertake their roles. This includes recommendations about the content of the training, who should be trained, and when this training should be received.

We accept these recommendations. Although mandatory training is already a requirement in our rules, we aim to expand the content and offer it earlier in the term, to better prepare committee members for their roles. Furthermore, we intend to appoint a specific person in the Society to take responsibility for the content of the training, to ensure that it is properly administered regardless of the availability of external resources.

Section 10: Members and guests

Section 10 outlines a number of recommendations to improve the experience of members and guests. This includes a full disability access review, and a number of adjustments to ensure the Oxford Union is accessible to disabled members. Furthermore, Section 10 recommends an analysis of membership fee structures and new consideration of how events with "controversial" speakers may affect the experience of members.

We are already taking steps to restructure our membership, with digital membership reducing the differentiation between access and non-access members. We also already offer the possibility of paying for membership in monthly installments. We will continue to highlight this to prospective members and consider better ways to communicate membership options in the future.

We are committed to exploring a new accessibility policy, improving training (see Section 9 above), and implementing changes to our rules to ensure longevity in our accessibility improvements.

Finally, we have begun discussing the best way to restructure our invitations process, in order to better assess the impact speakers might have. We will explore ways to build this into our invitation systems in the coming term.

Section 11: Staff

Section 11 recommends a variety of policy changes designed to improve the working environment for the Society's paid staff.

We will work with stakeholders to create new policies to ensure staff feel safe and well looked after at work, and to ensure our paid staff policies are in line with our wider equality and access aims.

We will also offer additional training to staff (see Section 9 above) to ensure that staff are well equipped for their roles.