

Report of the Equality and Access Review of the Oxford Union Society

Executive Summary

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Executive Summary

1. The Oxford Union Society (the Union) is a debating society founded in 1823. Its membership is principally made up of students and former students at the University of Oxford. To the wider public, the University and Union are often incorrectly conflated as the same institution. The Union is not registered as a University Club with the Proctors' Office of the University. It is a private student society. The Union is an unincorporated association. Its property is held on trust by the Oxford Literary and Debating Union Trust (OLDUT), which is predominantly made up of former Union members.
2. The Union is most well-known for hosting debates and addresses by distinguished guests. While the invitations to some figures prove controversial, the Union has as one of its objects upholding and protecting its members and guests' freedom of speech and expression.¹ The Union also provides a library, reading/writing rooms, a bar and other recreational facilities to members.
3. The Union is a highly political organisation involving elections for the role of President, other Officer positions and a Standing Committee. These rotate each term. There are a large number of other committees within the Union largely filled by students. The President, officers and Standing Committee hold significant responsibility for the running of the Union. There is some oversight from Senior Officers and an Audit Committee. The Union also employs staff most notably a Bursar who is responsible for the day to day running of the organisation.
4. This review emanates from events on 17 October 2019, when Ebenezer Azamati, a Union member, sought to attend the No Confidence debate. Mr Azamati is blind and Black. The No Confidence debate is one of the Union's

¹ Rule 2(b) *Rules, Standing Orders, and Special Schedules of the Oxford Union Society* (the Rules)

flagship events. It is held at the start of each academic year. MPs and students debate confidence in the Government of the day. It is an open event, meaning that new graduate and undergraduate students can attend and sample the Union's events to decide whether to join.

5. Mr Azamati was initially turned away from the debate. He was subsequently admitted only for two security guards to remove him by force. This incident was partly captured on film, which is publicly available on the internet.² He eventually left voluntarily. Shortly afterwards, disciplinary proceedings were brought against Mr Azamati alleging violence and dishonesty. The allegations and initial findings against him were made public. All the allegations against him were withdrawn on appeal.
6. Many months later, the Union accepted that the allegations of dishonesty and violence against Mr Azamati were wholly unfounded and untrue; that they had wrongly brought disciplinary proceedings against him and that what happened to him had been fundamentally wrong. The Union apologised to him unreservedly.
7. These events unsurprisingly led to calls for root and branch changes to be made at the Union to align its actions with the progressive values it seeks to champion, including being fully welcoming, open and accessible to all those who wish to hear and contribute to the exchange and debate of ideas which the Union exists to promote, particularly those of marginalised and underrepresented people.
8. The Union unreservedly accepted the force of these calls for institutional change. It expressed a commitment to change, to ensure that it becomes an institution in which such an incident can never recur.³

² See, for example, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DGTzI2wIKdg>

³ See the Statement by the Union here: <https://www.oxford-union.org/sites/default/files/inline-files/Statement%20%281%29.pdf>

9. The Union agreed to commission an independent Equality and Access Review (the Review) as part of its response to events involving Mr Azamati.
 10. On 5 March 2021 we were instructed to carry out the Review. On 7 June 2021 we provided our full report to the Union.
 11. The report begins with an overview of the Union's legal responsibilities under the Equality Act 2010 and key sources of good practice guidance. The Union appeared to understand that it had legal obligations to its staff under the Equality Act 2010 in its capacity as an employer. However, we do not believe that the Union has ever really understood the legal duties it owes to its members and guests under the Equality Act 2010 in its capacity as an association.
 12. It then analyses the image and culture of the Union. Troubling themes emerged in the evidence about, in particular, the treatment of female members of the Union, those with disabilities and staff. There is also a culture of unwillingness or inability to complain about discrimination, harassment or victimisation. This is coupled with the hyperpoliticised environment in which claims of discrimination can be raised against members as election tactics. Both ends of this spectrum leave those suffering discrimination in a culture that does not seek to root out such behaviour. The Union has some internal policies which, on any view, will disadvantage those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds.
 13. We considered the Union's Rules, policies and procedures. The Rules are archaic, cumbersome and unduly technical. They are in desperate need of revision, as the Union was advised almost 20 years ago in Peter Jay's *Future Governance* review. Rule 71, which deals with misconduct issues, is in particular
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need of attention. We were surprised to find that the Union does not have an equality and access policy relating to its role as an association. The adoption of such a policy by the Union is one of our key recommendations.

14. The report addresses issues of leadership, governance and strategy. The rotating nature of the Union's Presidents and Standing Committees makes for lack of continuity. The Access Committee, which is intended to address equality issues, is virtually powerless. Financial support is needed to improve access to Standing Committee roles for those from more modest backgrounds. As the more permanent fixture, the role of the Bursar requires stronger accountability and governance systems generally. In order to avoid equality and access issues falling foul of the short-term nature of termly cycles of Presidents, we recommend that the Union commits to an overarching and regularly updated equality and access strategy, with a concept of custodianship to bind each incoming President and Standing Committee to it.
15. A key issue is the respective complaints and discipline systems for members, staff and independent contractors. The system for members is opaque, archaic, litigious and suggestive of bias. There are fundamental gaps in the system which contribute to an actual inability to complain about discrimination, harassment or victimisation for certain groups and/or in certain contexts. The Union needs to grapple with these overlapping systems and provide a composite solution so that all involved in the Union can complain about discrimination, harassment or victimisation and those who perpetuate these issues be held accountable for it where appropriate.
16. We reviewed the Union's commitment to equality and diversity training of various kinds. However it raises key concerns about gaps in the intended training programme and expresses doubts about whether the commitment is being met in practice. It makes recommendations to expand the content of the training

programme and make it mandatory for staff and Committee members before they take up office.

17. The report also addresses some specific further issues relating to members and guests. It makes recommendations to improve access for those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds and to ensure more dignified treatment of those members who pay reduced membership fees. It expresses concern about the existing approach to members and guests with disabilities, including highlighting an internal Rule which is offensive in its treatment of guide dogs. It addresses the sensitive and complex issue concerning the tension between the Union's selection of speakers in the name of promoting free speech and its equality and access agenda.
18. Finally the report considers particular issues relating to staff. It recommends a refresh of staff contractual documentation and the staff capability procedure and emphasises the key nature of the imminent Bursar recruitment. It highlights the role played by the Union's security staff and the risk of third party harassment by 'mere' members.
19. Throughout the report we make a series of recommendations, appended hereto.
20. It was notable to us that the Union has received reports before which touch on governance and equality issues. The ones of which we are aware are from Peter Jay (2002), Dr Jeya Wilson (2020) and Beatrice Barr (2020). There was limited evidence of implementation of the recommendations of these reports.
21. The Union is plainly at a turning point in its history. Recent events provide it with an opportunity to transform its approach to equality and access issues so that it is fit for purpose as a modern, inclusive student society. We hope that this report assists in that endeavour.

Recommendations

Section 4: Legal and good practice overview

1. We recommend that the Union 'levels up' by developing an equality and access strategy which:
 - a. works on the basis that all the protected characteristics in the Equality Act 2010 apply in full to the Union's role as an association; and
 - b. takes steps to address combined discrimination and discrimination due to socio-economic disadvantage.
2. We recommend that the Union uses the wording of the public sector equality duty set out in the Equality Act 2010, s149 as a basis for its future equality and access strategy.
3. We recommend that the Union initiates and embeds a process of conducting Equality Impact Assessments in respect of its decision-making.

Section 5: Image and culture

4. We agree with the Wilson report that the Union needs to cultivate a culture that is welcoming, respectful and just; it needs to address and challenge racism or any form of discrimination, abuse, harassment and bullying, and demonstrate zero-tolerance; and it needs to uphold and be accountable for the highest standards of equality, inclusivity and diversity.
5. In light of the particularly concerning aspects of the Union's culture described in this section, we recommend that the Union focus in the short and medium term on taking steps to improve the treatment of female members, those from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds, those with disabilities and staff.
6. We recommend that the Union adopt a statement of its core values, in consultation with its members and staff.

7. We recommend that the Union adopt a statement of expected standards of behaviour by all members and staff. At the very least such a list must include taking positive steps to promote equality and access, avoiding discrimination, harassment, victimisation or bullying of any kind and challenging any such conduct in others. These standards should be visibly displayed in the Union's premises.
8. The Union should continue to develop its outreach programme and make positive efforts to seek out students from under-represented backgrounds. Open events should be held to explain how students can become involved in the Union's Committees. A mentoring scheme should be considered.
9. The Union should develop a system for collating and analysing data on the protected characteristics of its Committee members. This would help quantify improvements in diversity of representation on an objective basis. The Audit Committee should receive regular reports on the Union's performance in this regard. The Union should ensure its data protection policy is updated to reflect any data collected in relation to the sensitive personal data of Committee members.
10. The publicity of the Union and the termcard should visibly represent the full diversity of members.
11. We recommend certain amendments to the physical environment of the Union to make it more welcoming.
12. We recommend that the Union work with Peninsula to devise strategies to make the staff feel more valued and appreciated in their work and ensure their engagement with the values and standards projects.

Section 6: Rules, policies and procedures

13. The Union should, as a matter of urgency and as already recommended in the Jay and Wilson reports, re-write its Rules.

14. We recommend that the Union amends Rule 71(1) to make clear that all forms of discrimination, harassment and victimisation under the Equality Act 2010, bullying and harassment (as defined by the Protection from Harassment Act 1997) will be considered potential acts of misconduct.
15. We recommend that the Union repeals Rule 71(1)(B) and (C).
16. We recommend that the Union repeals Rule 71(9).
17. We recommend that the need for Rules 71(7) and (8) is reconsidered.
18. We recommend that Rule 71 is reviewed more generally and re-drafted into a standalone list of clearly defined, distinct and logically ordered misconduct offences.
19. The Union should to consider voluntarily complying with the University's procedures, codes of practice and policies as if it were a society registered with the Proctors' Office.
20. We recommend that the Union makes its list of policies on the website more accessible for the benefit of members, prospective members and staff. It should also correct the descriptions of the Accessible Pass Policy, the F-Fee document and the statement made by the Union apologising to Mr Azamati and announcing this review. It should publish the Protection of Children and Vulnerable Adults and Equal Opportunities and Dignity at Work policies.
21. We recommend that the Union adopts an equality and access policy.

Section 7: Leadership, governance and strategy

22. The Union should take steps to explain and promote the different roles available in a clear and accessible way, through publication of the draft handbook or similar document.

23. The Union should implement the Jay and Wilson report recommendations to streamline its Committee structure and provide clear guidance on the roles and responsibilities of Committee members.
24. We recommend that the number of roles appointed by the President be reduced and more transparent methods of selection adopted.
25. We recommend that the Union introduce clear job descriptions and make provision for handovers and inductions for all Committee roles.
26. We recommend that the Union strengthen the decision-making powers of the Access Committee and increase its budget, so that it can make meaningful changes in respect of equality and access issues. It should be given greater prominence in the Union's governance. Consideration should be given to appointing Access Committee officers on a yearly basis instead of a termly one, so as to enable them to work on longer term equality and access projects. The Access Committee should be held more accountable with open meetings and clear reporting lines.
27. We recommend that the Union make the Liberation Officer posts open to all applicants, irrespective of protected characteristic and modernise their name.
28. We recommend that the Union allocate funds to support a scheme to provide confidential, means-based financial support for Presidents during their term and Committee members doing vacation work. We recommend that nomination fees are abolished.
29. We recommend that the Union works closely with its recruitment consultants to recruit a new Bursar with the skills and experience needed to help embed cultural change around equality and access issues.
30. We recommend that the Union also works closely with its recruitment consultants to ensure that the job description for the Bursar's role is realistic and resilient, reducing the risk of single point of failure identified by Dr Wilson, and clarifying the

inter-relationships between the role of the Bursar, the President, Committees and the Senior Officers.

31. We recommend that the Union develops more formal systems for oversight over the Bursar's performance.
32. We recommend that the Union adopts a clear, and regularly updated, equality and access strategy including annual plans and targets. There is a live and fundamental question as to who should set and enforce such a strategy, and who should exercise governance responsibility to make sure it is implemented. The Union will need to decide whether these responsibilities should sit with the Senior Officers, an enhanced Audit Committee or some form of new Executive Committee.
33. We recommend the Union introduce the concept of "*custodianship*" for Committee members so that they have a longer-term perspective on their roles.
34. We recommend the Union take steps to improve the accountability of its officers and to increase member input into and understanding of its decision-making. These could include public meetings at which officers can be asked questions, member surveys and feedback/discussion groups.
35. The Union should designate one member of its Audit Committee and/or one of its Trustees as having particular responsibility for equality and access issues, and publicise this person's role, to further underscore the Union's commitment to change in this area.

Section 8: Complaints and discipline

36. We recommend that the Union adopts a new overarching, confidential complaints and discipline procedure, which is explicitly linked with the new statement of expected standards of behaviour we have recommended in section 5, making clear that breaches of those standards will lead to disciplinary proceedings.

37. This should set out clear routes for members, staff and independent contractors to complain about, and be held accountable for, discrimination and other conduct breaching expected standards of behaviour.
38. The new policy can either 'signpost' to the provisions of Rule 71 (or its replacement) and the staff grievance and disciplinary procedures or can make fresh provision for both systems. The latter would be our preferred course as both Rule 71 and the staff grievance and disciplinary procedures are dated and inadequate in several respects.
39. The new complaints and discipline process should include both formal and informal stages.
40. The requirement that the President adopts a complaint on behalf of a member of staff or independent contractor should be removed.
41. Students should not be involved in investigating complaints made about the conduct of other students or staff.
42. The Union should replace the JDC, IDC and SDC system with a streamlined procedure.
43. The Union should review the role of the Returning Officer as both clerk to the Disciplinary Committees and first port of call for students reporting discrimination. If they are to remain in either role, their independence should be prioritised.
44. Individuals who are independent of the current Union committee structure should make decisions on complaints.

45. The Senior Officers and/or members of Audit Committee/Trustees should take a more active role in the complaints and discipline process, or ideally appoint an external, independent person to take responsibility for it.
46. The Union should work with Peninsula and its independent contractors to agree appropriate complaints and discipline systems for those individuals, so that they can both complain about and be held accountable for discrimination.
47. Complaints regarding criminal conduct should not be made with the Union and the rules should make clear that the Union has no role in the determination or filtering of criminal complaints and that those affected by such conduct must go to the Police. The Union may wish to continue to supply information regarding local police services and University welfare services for those affected by criminal conduct that may take place at the Union.

Section 9: Training

48. We recommend that the Union extends Standing Order E15 to include (i) all the protected characteristics and prohibited conduct under the Equality Act 2010; (ii) the Union's legal responsibilities as an association and an employer under the Equality Act 2010; (iii) the handling of complaints relating to discrimination, harassment and victimisation.
49. The training should include the content of the new equality and access policies and strategy we have recommended in sections 7 and 11.
50. Elements of the training should be tailored to the specific roles of staff and Committee members.
51. The training should be made mandatory for all staff, including new joiners and contractors.

52. Completion of the training should be mandatory before Committee members take up office each term and adequate records should be kept to ensure that the Audit Committee can review the completion of the training.
53. The content of the training should be refreshed regularly.

Section 10: Members and guests

54. We recommend that the Union give consideration to merging the life and access membership categories and making separate and less public provision for the cost of membership.
55. We recommend that the Union set up a working group to reconsider its fees structure. Its remit should be to consider extensions of the entitlement to access membership and the introduction of tiered membership. It should explore how the different categories of tiered membership might operate, how the logistics of applications might work (drawing from other examples in the University as appropriate) and the costs/benefits to the Union. It should also consider payment of the fee by instalments. This group should include at least one of the Senior Officers and/or members of Audit Committee. It should have the authority to make decisions on the outcome, rather than this being in the gift of any one President or Standing Committee.
56. We recommend that Accessible Pass Policy is re-written in conjunction with specialist disability advisers, potentially from within the University, to provide a more accommodating and inclusive approach to the attendance of and guests with disabilities at Union events.
57. We recommend that all Union policies and other important documents are made accessible to those who are blind or visually impaired.
58. We recommend that the Union repeals Rule 51 and makes appropriately worded policy provision for those who require the assistance of guide dogs.

59. We recommend that the Union adopt, as part of its overarching equality and diversity policy, a specific policy addressing its legal duties to make reasonable adjustments for members and guests. This should absorb the content of the current APP but go wider.
60. The Union should set out in this policy the adjustments that it has already identified that it can make and make clear it will consider further adjustments on a case-by-case basis.
61. The Union should conduct a full review of its wheelchair accessibility, and the support it offers for blind, deaf, and deaf-blind members to ensure it is fully catering for members with a wide variety of conditions.
62. The Union should consider engaging specialist disability services to assist in this task and in identifying other adjustments that can be made.
63. The new reasonable adjustments policy should be prominently publicised on the Union's website and in membership recruitment drives.
64. The Union should ensure its Committee and staff members who make decisions on reasonable adjustment issues are properly trained.
65. We recommend that the Union conducts an Equality Impact Assessment of all its potential speaker choices.
66. The Access Committee's role in speaker selection should be formalised.
67. Speakers should be chosen after greater collaboration with specialist student societies. The approach taken by the Deborah Soh taskforce should become the standard. Different formats for events should also be considered.

Section 11: Staff

68. We recommend that the Union works with Peninsula to harmonise its staff contracts.

69. We understand that Peninsula is conducting a strategic human resources review for the Union and that recruitment consultants are assisting in the recruitment of a new Bursar. We hope that both organisations will take into account the findings of our report. In particular we refer to the recommendations we have made in section 7 about the job description and person requirements for the Bursar role.
70. We recommend that the Union work with Peninsula to update the Equal Opportunities and Dignity at Work policy into a new Equality, Diversity and Inclusion policy for staff, to comply with the standards set out above. This policy should sit alongside the new equality and access policy for the Union in its role as an association which we recommend in section 6. The new staff policy should be positively communicated to staff, easily accessible and regularly updated.
71. We have recommended in section 5 that the Union work with Peninsula to devise strategies to make the staff feel more valued and appreciated in their work and ensure their engagement with the values and standards projects.
72. This work should aim to secure and embed the commitment of the staff to the statement of values of the Union.
73. The work will also need to address the expected standards of behaviour from staff, given the evidence referred to in section 5 about members feeling uncomfortable due to certain elements of staff attitudes and behaviours.
74. We recommend that the Union works with Peninsula to ensure that its staff capability procedure is fit for purpose and complies with the Equality Act 2010.
75. We recommend that the Union develops a system for collating and analysing data on the protected characteristics of its staff and reporting regularly on this information.
76. Where there are under-represented groups within the workforce the Union should consider exercising positive action powers under the Equality Act 2010 in recruitment exercises in order to redress these imbalances. Peninsula should be able to advise the Union further on this.

77. The Union's Equal Opportunities and Dignity at Work policy states that the Union "*Will regularly monitor the effects of selection decisions and personnel and pay practices and procedures to assess whether equal opportunity and dignity at work are being achieved*". However, we have seen no evidence of such monitoring.
78. The commitment to broader equality monitoring set out in the Equal Opportunities and Dignity at Work policy should be updated in conjunction with Peninsula and complied with.
79. We recommend that the Union work with Peninsula to adopt a procurement strategy which mainstreams their equality aims and objectives.
80. The Union should take active steps to ensure that the security staff and other contracted workers are trained in, and comply with, the requirements of the Equality Act 2010.
81. In order to promote equality and better protect its staff and members the Union should adopt a zero-tolerance attitude towards any incident in which any employee or other member is abused, harassed or discriminated against by 'mere' members. The Union should use signage to communicate its policy to members and make them aware that abuse of staff or other members will not be tolerated. The Union should use the disciplinary procedure against members as appropriate.

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