

The Oxford Union Society

Equality Diversity Access and Inclusion Report for 2021/22

Introduction

This is the first annual Equality, Diversity, Accessibility and Inclusion (EDAI) report prepared for the Oxford Union in accordance with its [EDAI Policy](#) approved in February 2022, together with a supporting strategy and plan. Although the Union is not formally subject to the public sector equality duty, the Union's policy embodies and reflects its key principles. There has been a considerable amount of activity as the Union has sought to make progress on many aspects of its EDAI arrangements, including meeting the commitments made in the Union's [public statement](#) in response to the external Equality and Access Review that it commissioned following an incident at the Union in 2019. That Review usefully highlighted some of the main issues which the Union needed to address and throughout the year Standing Committee, in consultation where appropriate with the Access and other Committees, has given a high priority to progressing and implementing action on them. This report outlines some of the main areas of action to address the recommendations of the Equality and Access Review but is also intended to be a more wide-ranging review and assessment of equality and diversity issues within the Union.

Rules and Policies

As recommended by the Equality & Access Review, the Society Rules were reviewed in detail and a major rule change was implemented in Michaelmas Term 2021. This involved rationalising various piecemeal changes introduced over time, to make the Rules clearer and more logical and accessible. Their overall length was reduced by more than 20% and, in particular, the disciplinary procedures under Rules 33 and 71 were streamlined and made more accessible and fair for all parties. To the extent that they have been used over the course of the year, the new procedures have generally worked satisfactorily although consideration is now being given to the development of clearer processes for the informal resolution of complaints.

A number of other more routine and technical changes have been introduced to Rules over the year, e.g. to strengthen the financial arrangements, but in the context of this report the establishment of the role of Welfare Officers is worth highlighting. As various members of Standing Committee seek to promote various initiatives, it will be an ongoing challenge to ensure that the Rules do not again increase in length and become unnecessarily complex.

Governance

The challenges of running the Union effectively to meet the needs of both current and future members have been very apparent during the last year. We have tried to improve continuity and institutional memory through the appointment of a Chief Custodian and the drafting of handover manuals for key offices. At date of publication, only some of these manuals have been delivered. Despite individual members' best intentions and the new arrangements put in place during the past year, the current structure and arrangements are not conducive to sustained and effective management of the Society. Audit Committee, together with the Members of Standing

Committee for both Trinity and Michaelmas Term, consider some more fundamental changes are necessary to secure the future of the Union and its buildings and facilities. Consideration of the various options for this will be a high priority in the year ahead.

Equality Monitoring

A major plank of activity has been to collect and analyse data from the Society's current membership to provide for the first time some quantitative data on the diversity of its membership. This was collected on a voluntary and anonymous basis in February 2022 and some 595 members responded to the invitation. The results are therefore indicative rather than comprehensive, but they have provided for the first time some hard data about the Society's current membership. A copy of the report on the data collected from this exercise, together with the results of an analysis of member joiner statistics where gender was inferred from chosen title or form of address is attached to this report.

Key points from the analysis are:

- (1) Despite there now being parity between the genders in the University of Oxford as a whole, the Union membership is still male dominated (53% (M); 40% (F)) from the equality monitoring survey, with very similar ratios from the member joining statistics.
- (2) Although some individual years have seen a smaller percentage gender gap, there has been very little change in the rolling average over the last six years.
- (3) The Union has a much higher number of members declaring themselves to be non-binary (4% non-binary; 2% 'prefer not to say'; and 1% 'other') than in the University as a whole.
- (4) The Union is 72% white, 28% non-white, a lower proportion of non-whites than the University where 34% of students are non-white, but significantly higher than in the UK population as a whole at the 2011 census when only 14% of the population as a whole was non-white.
- (5) Asians or Asian British (8%) are the largest non-white ethnic group responding to the survey, Black, African, Caribbean or Black British together account for 3%.
- (6) 50% of survey respondents declared themselves to be of no religion, the same proportion as the University but significantly higher than the 25% declaring themselves to be of no religion in the 2011 UK census return.
- (7) 37% of respondents declared themselves to be Christian, significantly more than in the 25% declaring themselves to be Christian in the University returns but less than the 59% of respondents who declared themselves to be Christian in the UK 2011 census.
- (8) Muslim, Hindu, and Jewish respondents each accounted for 3% of the Union survey responses, with the respective University figures 4%, 3%, and 2%, so broadly in line with the University.
- (9) Only 65% of the Union's survey respondents declared themselves to be 'straight or heterosexual', whereas the University equivalent figure is 70%, and that for the UK population as a whole is 94%.
- (10) 15% of the Union's survey respondents were bisexual (University, 8%); 10% were gay or lesbian (University, 8%), all far higher figures than the 2011 census indicated for the UK population as a whole (just 1%, with 4% of the Census population preferring not state their sexual orientation).
- (11) 69% of Union survey respondents have their primary home in the UK whereas in the University the figure is just 55%, the discrepancy perhaps reflecting the fact that a

higher proportion of active Union members are undergraduates whereas the proportion of overseas students is much higher of graduate programmes.

- (12) 60% of Union members were from state-funded or predominantly state-funded schools, c.f. 69% in the University as a whole and 93% of UK school-age students.
- (13) 11% of the Union members responding to the survey stated that they had qualified for the reduced cost Access membership, while 17% declared that they were not eligible because they had come from overseas, and 7% preferred not to say.
- (14) 93% had not and 4% preferred not to say but 3% of survey respondents said that they had been in local authority care in the period since they were 14. (Equivalent data is not available for the University.).
- (15) 27% of Union survey respondents declared themselves to have a physical/mental health condition lasting more than 12 months, considerably higher than the University (17%).
- (16) Mental health (nearly 18% of members, more than 51% of those declaring themselves to have a physical/mental health condition) was the principal cause, higher than in the University where just 5% declared a mental health problem, accounting for just over 31% of those declaring a physical or mental health problem.
- (17) The main other declared conditions were social or behavioural (e.g. autism) (8%); learning, understanding, or concentration (nearly 9%); stamina, breathing, or fatigue (over 6%); physical mobility (over 6%); memory (5%); vision (4%); hearing (3.5%).

Despite the relatively small response from currently active members (some 3,000 members a year join the Union), the survey results provide some useful indications of the diversity of the Union's currently active members who attend events, serve on committees and vote in elections. The responses received are clearly not representative of the estimated 150,000 life members across the world but they do demonstrate that although the Union continues to attract more male than female new members, many of whom come from privileged backgrounds, the Union is in many respects a very diverse society, including substantial numbers of people who come from less privileged backgrounds, from ethnic minority and a range of religious backgrounds, do not consider themselves to be heterosexual, and have a range of learning or mental health issues and physical disabilities. .

Building on the experience of the above a further survey of Committee members and other office holders, known as 'persons of trust' in the Society's Rules, was also carried out early in Trinity Term 2022. For this survey, the questionnaire was expanded to include questions on whether the persons of trust were graduate or postgraduates, a differently phrased question on educational background, and a question on whether respondents considered themselves to be from a working-class background. But although there were about 100 potential respondents and the importance of their participation was strongly emphasised, only 34 responses to the survey were received, perhaps because survey fatigue had set in.

The results of this second smaller survey may therefore not be fully representative and it is also worth noting that Committee Demographics change dramatically from term to term. However, the key points from the responses to the survey of persons of trust and other sources of information about members of Standing Committee still provide an interesting view of the Society's committees. The results were:

- (1) 50% declared themselves as female, 47% as male, and 3% provided another response. This reflects conscious efforts made by the President and others involved in making appointments to unelected positions following elections to Committees to ensure a more even gender balance than there is amongst the membership as a whole. However, the gender constitution of the Society's Governing Body, Standing Committee, was much less balanced, particularly among those holding directly elected positions. Across the course of the 2022/2023 academic year, the directly elected make-up of Standing Committee was 73% male, 27% female.¹ This shows that more progress needs to be made. It is, however, worth noting that these statistics do not necessarily reflect the willingness of female candidates to stand for direct election to Standing Committee: in HT22 seven of the twelve (58%) of the candidates for Junior Officer positions identified as female. This figure was 38% for both the MT21 and TT22 elections.
- (2) 33% of respondents to the survey indicated that they did not identify as a member of any ethnic minority group, suggesting that they are well represented in relation to membership numbers. 24% declared themselves to be Asian or Asian British. Over the course of the academic years 2021/2022, only two of the twelve (17%) Sitting Junior Officers identified as being white and not members an ethnic minority group.²
- (3) 41% (c.f. 50% in the whole Union survey) declared themselves to be of no religion; 30% (c.f. 37% of the whole Union survey) declared themselves to be Christian, with 29% professing other faiths.
- (4) 62% (c.f. 65% in the whole Union survey) declared themselves as being straight or heterosexual and 38% (c.f. 30% in the whole Union survey) identified as having other sexual orientations.
- (5) 82% (c.f. 69% in the whole Union survey) were home students, suggesting that home students are more likely than overseas students to become involved actively in the running of the Union.
- (6) 85% of persons of trust were undergraduates and 15% were postgraduates. This data was not collected in the original survey.
- (7) 29% (10) of respondents identified themselves as coming from a working-class background with 65% not so identifying and 6% preferring not to say. This data was not collected in the original survey.
- (8) 50% of respondents to this survey completed the majority of their secondary education in a private school, 35% in a non-selective state school, and 15% in a selective state school. In the whole Union survey where respondents were only asked about their last two years of schooling and 60% were educated in a state funded or predominantly state funded school but it does suggest that privately educated students are more likely to get involved with the Union.
- (9) 32% (11) of respondents to the survey (c.f. 11% in the whole Union survey) indicated that they had qualified for Access membership, suggesting that the Access members are playing a full and active part in the Society.
- (10) 42% of respondents (c.f. 27% indicated that they had a physical or mental health condition expected to last more than 12 months. Although it is possible that these

¹ The Offices of President-Elect and Librarian-Elect were held by a woman in MT21 and President and Librarian in HT22. The Office of Secretary was held by a woman in all three terms of the academic year 2021/2022. Three women were Elected Members of Standing Committee out of a total of 16 across the year.

² Sitting Junior Officers being The President, The Librarian, The Treasurer, and The Secretary.

members were more likely to engage with the survey, this result suggests that they are well represented on current Committees.

Standing Committee has agreed that in future new members should be invited to complete an equality monitoring form when they join the Union. To avoid response fatigue from members with repeated surveys, this data will be collected and managed in such a way that, subject to appropriate protections on publication and access to the data, it will provide more reliable information on Committee membership. The ability to do this will be part of the requirement for the membership management software that the Union will be acquiring for the forthcoming membership recruitment drive.

A survey of current staff conducted at the end of Trinity Term 2022 indicated that 50% are male and 50% female, 100% white, and 40% have a long-term disability or illness. Given the low numbers of staff employed (9 FTE, 1 PTE), it is important to recognise that one appointment or departure of a single member of staff will have a significant effect on the figures. With effect from May 2022 all new appointments are being advertised to encourage applications from ethnic minority and other under-represented groups and all applicants for new posts are being invited to complete equality monitoring questionnaires.

Addressing Socio-economic disadvantage

Although there is a widespread public perception that the Union is dominated by those from a very privileged educational and socio-economic background, the equality monitoring survey results suggest a different picture. There is undoubtedly room for improvement and no grounds for complacency but a considerable proportion of the currently active members do come from less privileged backgrounds. Several initiatives are in place to encourage this:

(1) Access membership. To ensure that the Union and its activities are reasonably accessible to students from lower income households, the Union introduced discounted membership fees in 2003. During 2022/23, 172 out of a total of 3,090 new members (5.6%) qualified for Access or reduced-cost life membership, paying £165 (or £150 if enrolling before 2nd week of Michaelmas Term) rather than the full price membership fee of £278 (or £250 for early enrolment). A proportion of reduced-price tickets for Access members were also reserved for higher cost ticketed social events in order to facilitate their full participation in the Union's social events. In practice, however, there were often difficulties in identifying these members and processing the discount, an issue that is being addressed..

For 2022/23 and following full consultation with the Access Committee, the Union has extended eligibility for Access membership to all those who are eligible for the University's Crankstart Scholarships (household income of £27,500 or less), rather than restricting eligibility to those who qualify for the UK Government's maximum Maintenance Loan, for which the qualification is a household income of £25,000 or less. The Union is also re-introducing for 2022/3 arrangements for payment of the membership fee by three termly instalments, an arrangement that was not possible with the online application process used in 2021/22. It is hoped that these changes make the purchase of membership accessible for more students.

(2) Outreach initiatives. As many of the currently active Union members were themselves experiencing their first fully active year in Oxford since the disruptions of the pandemic, there was only limited outreach activity during 2021/2. However, Committee members hosted 5 visits from

state-funded, non-selective state schools to observe debates, participate in workshops and/or visit the buildings, not including the dozens of schools that visit the Union for Oxford Schools' Debating Competition. The Safeguarding Policy has also been reviewed and updated to support this. Oxford Schools' Debating Competition is still the largest school-level debating competition in the world and attracts teams from across the globe; the Society makes a conscious effort to use the competition to break down conceptions about the Union and the University and every year we are told by teachers and schools that we have succeeded in doing so.

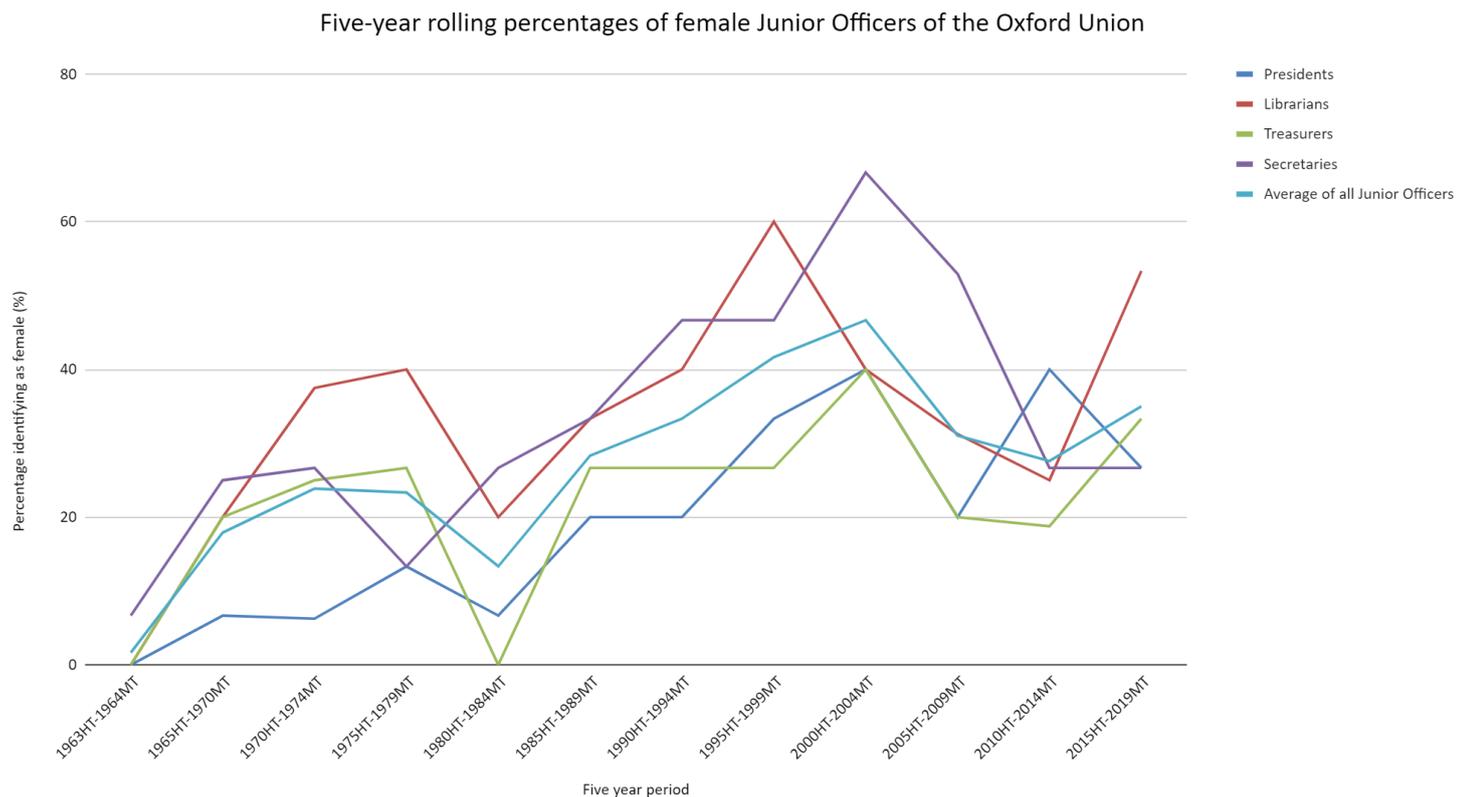
(3) Presidential Living Cost Support Grant. The Union has continued with the grant of a Presidential Living Cost Support Grant, originally introduced in 2020/21, which is payable according to personal circumstances. The President may apply in order to assist with the payment of living costs and other reasonable expenses during the term of their office. As most of those who serve as President now suspend their studies for three terms in line with University policy the ability to access this grant removes one of the primary obstacles to an individual's presidential candidature.

Culture change

Throughout the year, there has been strong awareness amongst the Union's leadership of the need to reflect on and change those aspects of the Union's culture which might make it feel unwelcoming to certain groups of potential or actual members. A statement of the Union's behavioural values is incorporated within the Union's Equality Policy and even before the policy was formally adopted, each President during 2022/23 was actively seeking to emphasise and uphold these values. With the diverse membership of most Committees, there was strong sympathy and support for this. There was a delay in introducing the compulsory Staff and Committee equality training required under the terms of Standing Order E15, but all incoming Committee members or persons holding positions of trust in the Union during Trinity Term undertook a half day, face-to-face training session in the Union. Incoming members of Committee for Michaelmas Term 2022 and all other persons holding positions of trust have been instructed to complete equivalent equality training, lasting at least 5 hours online.

Nevertheless, there are always strong internal tensions between members and on committees, especially in the run up to the termly elections. The newly established Welfare Officer posts have provided useful support at these and other times. As any breaches of the Society's behavioural values or conduct that constitutes harassment, bullying or victimisation of any group or is motivated by such intention to discriminate are necessarily taken very seriously, there is also high awareness of the damage that any such allegations can do to any individual candidate or group's electoral prospects. In 2021/2 there has sometimes been a real tension between the need to uphold the Union's behavioural values and code by ensuring that appropriate action is taken in response to complaints and the need to ensure that the fair and proper procedures set out in the revised Rule 71 Disciplinary Procedure are followed in response to such complaints. Where no formal complaints are made, are submitted and almost immediately withdrawn, or unsubstantiated rumours are circulating, it is not possible for the Returning Officer to fulfil his/her obligations to set up an appropriate Disciplinary Committee to investigate any valid complaints. During 2021/22 2 non-electoral complaints were formally submitted to the Returning Officer, both of which were withdrawn. 7 electoral complaints were referred to an Election Tribunal, which was called from a shortlist of Ex-Officers and Ex-Returning Officers who have been members for at least 18 terms.

But, quite apart from any formal procedures and despite the determined efforts of successive presidents holding office during the year, the general atmosphere in the Union in the run up to the termly elections has sometimes been very unpleasant, putting severe strain on the individuals involved. We recognise that this – or reports of this - is likely to be off-putting to many potential members and deters many from wanting to become more deeply involved in the Union or stand for election to the offices of President, Librarian, Treasurer, and Secretary – or even Standing Committee. Although the number of female candidates for officer positions has at times been equal or higher than the number of male candidates, the proportions of these posts held by women in the year has been disappointingly lower.

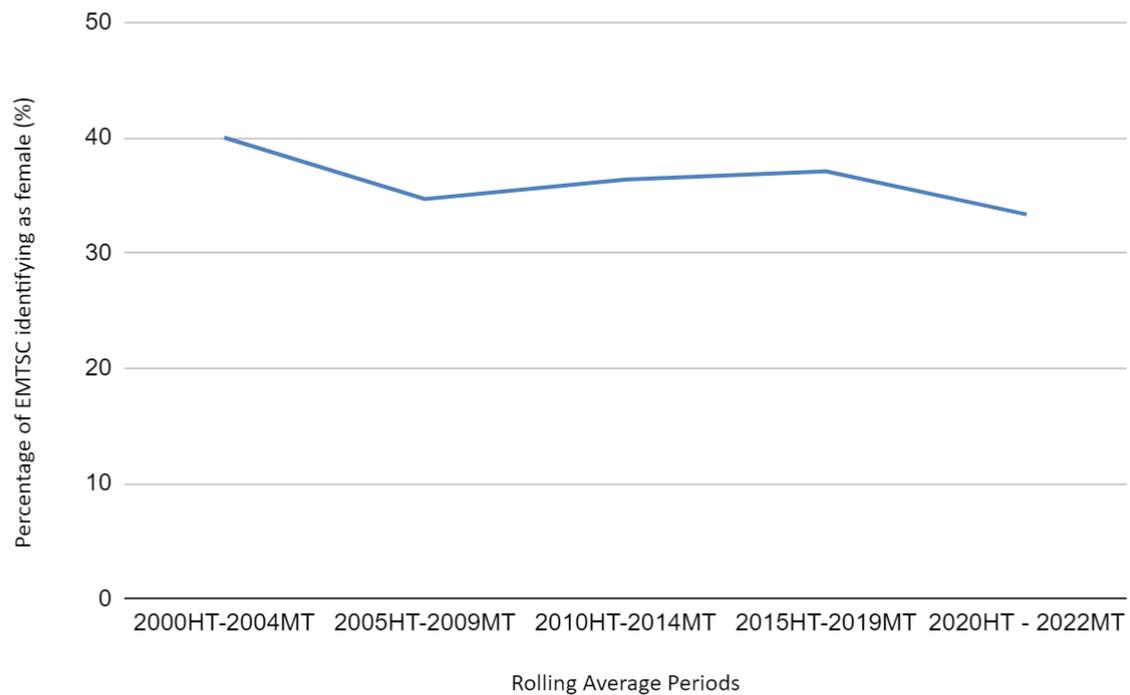


Despite a decrease in the period from 2010-2014, the general trend over the last 60 years is towards more female officers. Traditionally, the Offices of Secretary and Librarian have been held by women more frequently than those of President and Treasurer. The data for the last three years cannot be displayed on this chart as it is not part of a complete five year period. The relevant percentages, however, for 2020HT-2022MT are:

- Presidents: 33% female
- Librarians: 33% female
- Treasurers: 33% female
- Secretaries: 66% female
- Junior Officer average: 42% female
- Elected Member of TSC: 33% female
- Voting Members of TSC: 38% female

Percentage of Female Elected Members of Standing Committee over time since 2000

Measured in five-year rolling averages



Despite termly tensions and ongoing problems, many of those holding positions of trust demonstrate enormous commitment to the Union and its future. There is a desire amongst those involved to reform many of the practices of the Union and usher in cultural change that tackles the problems identified in the Equality and Diversity Review.

Free Speech and Diversity

Tensions can also arise in the development of the term card, particularly surrounding the invitation of speakers whose opinions may be considered offensive by members of the Society or the wider University community. This year's three Presidents have each sought to ensure that their term card contains a suitable range of diverse speakers and where facing external or internal pressure to withhold invitations or cancel speakers who might offend a particular group, these have been considered carefully but with the support of Standing Committee, decided that the principles of free speech should be upheld. Instead, they have tried to ensure that such controversial speakers are appropriately challenged, either in debate or by being questioned rigorously about their position and views. A late addition to the programme in Trinity Term was particularly contentious and has highlighted the need to develop a clear procedure for making any late additions to a term card. The Oxford Union Society remains committed to its founding principles of upholding and protecting the freedom of speech and expression of its Members and guests and aims to do so in a manner that is as inclusive and supportive as possible.

Encouraging Female Participation

As noted above, the Union has continued to be more attractive to male than female students who are under-represented in both its general membership, elected offices, and amongst elected Committees. To a certain extent this imbalance has been mitigated by the number of women appointed or indirectly elected to positions of responsibility: 65% of such positions in 2021/22 have been held by women.³ As is also noted above, the percentage of women in elected positions of responsibility is also not representative of the percentage of female candidates for such offices. Further investigation is required to understand why the percentage of female candidates is consistently higher than the percentage of those successfully elected.

In Hilary Term, the debate ‘This House welcomes the New Era of Porn’ attracted a predominantly female audience and the 8th week debate on the subject ‘Women can have it all’ was a well-attended debate in which all speakers, including those from the floor, were women. It is believed this was the first Thursday Debate in Union history with only female speakers. Furthermore there were speaker sessions on ‘Women in Climate Tech’ and ‘Gowns over Tails: women who shaped the Union’.

Inclusion Initiatives

A number of the debates and speaker events held over the year were intended to be of particular interest to certain other groups. They included a speaker panel on ‘Disabled Experience: Beyond the Equality Act’, which was held in conjunction with a well-attended disability social.

In addition to the debates and speaker events which are central to the Union, it also provides a richly varied programme of social activities for members and their guests. Many of these events have celebrated the diverse backgrounds of members and have included a ‘Wear it Pink’ Karaoke night in Michaelmas Term, the Union’s participation in the ‘Girls’ Night In’ protest against spiking in Michaelmas Term, the Society’s first social aimed exclusively for students from state school backgrounds in Hilary Term and a Solidarity Fashion Show in Trinity Term to celebrate and empower survivors of abuse, harm, and other personal trauma. Five open forum events were held in Trinity Term to understand better the issues and identify steps and actions to improve the treatment of historically underrepresented groups in the Union, hosted in turn by the Socio-Economic Officer, the Women’s Officer, the Disabilities Officer, the Ethnic Minorities Officer, and the LGBTQIA Officer

The Access Committee has been involved in full consultations surrounding all significant rules and procedural changes that have been made in the academic year 2021/2.

Improving Accessibility

The Union’s current leadership is acutely aware of the Union’s shortcomings in terms of accessibility to those who might find its historic buildings and facilities intimidating, unwelcoming, or physically inaccessible.

During 2021/22 a detailed access audit of the Union’s accessibility, including its approaches, buildings, and digital communications, was undertaken to identify the scope and particular areas for improvement. There were a large number, some more feasible than others and a number of changes have been introduced, including: improving the markings to show the edge of the stairs, improving the Accessible Pass Policy and giving greater prominence (e.g. in the termcard) to the information on the Union’s access arrangements; improving arrangements to ensure a more timely

³ Positions referenced: Chair of Consultative Committee, Returning Officer, Chief of Staff, Development Officer, Senior Access Officer, Director of Press, and Director of Communications.

and reliable response to requests for access assistance and re-locating Standing and other Committee meetings to the Goodman Library to facilitate access to those with mobility issues.

Other changes, e.g. to install automatic door or gate opening for disabled access and lifts to allow access to the upper floors of the building will require substantial capital investment. The poor state of the Union's buildings means that for the immediate future the main priority has to be making the buildings watertight and health and safety compliant. But improving the Union's accessibility must be a high priority for the future.

Management Initiatives

Although the Union is essentially run by the student members, its employees play a critical role in its operation. A new Bursar joined the Union in October and, together with the Senior Treasurer, has worked closely with student members to support many of these EDAI initiatives. However, there is currently insufficient management effort available to follow through effectively on all of them. The budget for 2022/23 provides for improved staffing and should facilitate further progress, particularly in those areas which are dependent on staff for delivery. Significantly, the Society will be hiring a 'Deputy Bursar' to coordinate the day-to-day running of the Union. This should enable the Bursar to have more available time to dedicate to long-term reforms to the Society and will give committee members another point of contact when acting on the recommendations of the Equality and Diversity Review.

The introduction of suitable training for Union employees was delayed but as at the end of Trinity Term arrangements are in place for staff to undertake approved EDAI training within four months of joining, to be refreshed at least at 5 yearly intervals. In Trinity Term, the Union also adopted a procurement strategy which requires the Bursar to prepare a programme for the review of all significant support contracts. As member-facing service contracts (e.g. providing security services or AV support) are re-tendered during the course of the summer, EDAI awareness and appropriate staff training will be one of the factors against which they are evaluated.

Equality Objectives

The work of improving Equality, Diversity, Accessibility and Inclusion is ongoing but the Union is committed to achieving that improvement. It needs to continue to improve its performance in a wide range of areas but, in particular, it has set itself its principal objectives for the next 4 years (to 2025/6) are:

- (1) Increase female participation:
 - a. Amongst the membership, improving the enrolment of female members to at least 45%.⁴
 - b. At Standing Committee and Officership levels, aiming for an average of at least 40% of the directly elected members of Standing Committee identifying as female.
- (2) Increase the Socio-Economic and educational diversity of the Society's Committees, aiming for an annual average of 50% of committee members having spent most of their education in non-selective state schools.⁵
- (3) Review the Union's governance and structure and by Trinity Term 2026 have either implemented agreed recommendations or developed a clear plan to complete implementation by Trinity Term 2027.

⁴ In the academic year 2021/2, 42% of new members identified their preferred title as 'Mrs, Ms, or Miss'. This will not be a totally accurate reflection of the intake of female members as it is impossible to determine the gender of those who recorded their preferred title as Dr, Professor, or 'Don't Know'.

⁵ In Trinity Term 2022, 35% of committee members who responded to our survey spent the majority of their education in non-selective state-funded schools.

- (4) Identify a programme of developments to improve physical accessibility and develop a plan of implementation and funding by Trinity Term 2027.