

The Oxford Union Society

Equality, Diversity, Accessibility, and Inclusion Strategy

Introduction

For nearly two hundred years, the Oxford Union Society has played an important part in the lives of many Oxford undergraduates. It continues to do so; its debates, library, talks, and social activities attract wide participation and engagement from across the University of Oxford and other Oxford-based higher education institutions. Its historic buildings with its debating chamber, two libraries, bar, meeting rooms, and other recreational rooms provide an outstanding environment for its activities.

But the Union has also changed and evolved over time to reflect the priorities, needs and ambitions of its currently active members and leadership. While preserving and promoting its great traditions, including the development and promotion of debating skills, free speech, and its excellent library facilities, a key priority of the current Standing Committee and active members of the Union is to realise the aims and ambitions of its Equality, Diversity, Access and Inclusion Policy adopted in February 2022.

The Union's renewed focus on equality and access reform was initially prompted by a regrettable incident in November 2019 which resulted in mediation against the Union and the commissioning of an external review of Equality and Access issues which made some 82 recommendations, the great majority of which were accepted and now need to be implemented.

Aims

The current leadership and active members both recognise and embrace the need for change; their vision is that the Oxford Union should be a truly open, diverse, accessible and inclusive society in which all who meet the criteria for membership feel welcome irrespective of their legally protected characteristics or socio-economic background, that they are treated with dignity and respect; and that all members enjoy an equality of opportunity to

- access its facilities and services
- pursue the objects of the Society
- participate in the full range of the Society’s core activities, according to their merit and general contribution to the Society’s purposes; and
- contribute to all aspects of the Society’s governance and general management through serving in appointed roles or in elected offices.

Equality Diversity Access and Inclusion Policy

In support of this, the Society and its leadership have already made several important changes since 2019 and adopted an overarching Equality, Diversity, Access and Inclusion Policy in January 2022 which sets out the Society’s policy objectives and identifies in broad terms the actions and measures that it is committed to making to ensure they are realised. The challenge now is to harness the energy and enthusiasm of the Society’s leadership to translate the vision into reality.

Key enablers

The successful implementation of the policy will be dependent on the following:

- ongoing effort and commitment from current and future leadership of the Society before, during and, to a certain extent, after their term of office;
- active support and engagement from Senior Officers, the Bursar and Union staff and contractors, as well as from the Audit Committee and the trustees of the Oxford Literary and Debating Union Trust;
- a clear strategy and plan, including specific targets, dates for their delivery, and supporting measures, with dates,
- clear allocation of responsibility and mechanisms for ensuring effective delivery of the plan and holding those responsible to account;
- good handover from President to President, with a focus on ensuring continuity of effort on EDAI matters;
- clear communications, supported by evidence, to ensure that the Society’s values, achievements, and progress in relation to the realisation of its equality, diversity, access, and inclusion objectives are understood by the wider University community, the media, and wider public; and

- investment of the necessary financial resources to improve the physical accessibility of the Society's buildings and improve the Society's accessibility more generally to those who come from less advantaged background.

Management, Delivery, and Reporting Arrangements

The President, supported by the President-Elect, will therefore take personal responsibility for the preparation and delivery of the supporting Equality Diversity and Inclusion Action plan. This will include details of actions necessary, assign responsibilities, and set timescales for implementation. Each President will report on progress regularly (at least twice a term) to Standing Committee and prepare written reports at the end of the term of office. The Trinity Term President's Equality, Diversity, Access and Inclusion report, which will review progress over the whole year, will be published, together with equality monitoring data, on the Society's website.

The President and President-Elect will be supported by other members of and attendees at Standing Committee, to whom specific tasks and responsibilities will be assigned, according to their interests, experience, and expertise. The President-Elect plans to brief and consult Access Committee weekly on EDAI issues during Full Term, and to hold weekly or fortnightly meetings with the Bursar and/or the Senior Treasurer to review progress. EDAI matters will be referred to Standing Committee for decision as required and at least twice a term, this President or President-Elect will report to Standing Committee more generally.

The Audit Committee will receive a progress at least termly from the President or President-Elect who will also be expected to brief OLDUT trustees at their meetings.

Timescales

EDAI will need to be an ongoing priority for the Union, and it may be several years before it is possible to assess fully the impact and success of its EDAI policy, strategy, and supporting plan. But even if it is necessary in the first instance for the Society to implement only interim solutions which will need further development and refinement in future, the aim is to ensure that most of the changes recommended in the Access and Diversity Review that are not dependent on the investment of substantial financial resources are in place by the end of Trinity Term 2022.