

Policy Briefing – Option for Multi-Year Membership of Departmental Societies

Activities Zone, May 2022

What is the current situation at UCL related to this proposal?

Students' Union UCL has over 27 affiliated Departmental Societies. Currently, departmental society membership works in the same way that other club and society membership's function. Students must register as members at the start of every academic year. Most students sign up in their first year, and then must renew at the start of each academic year to maintain their membership. As per Union regulations, Clubs and Societies can only engage with their membership. All students who attend or participate in society events are expected to be members.

Club and Society regulations also state that to stand in committee elections, students must have been a "full member [of the society] for at least 28 days before the vote takes place". Therefore, if a student has allowed their membership to lapse without renewing, they would be ineligible to run for a committee position even if they had been a member in previous years.

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

No.

Does this relate to any existing SU policy?

Yes, it would require the SU to change their clubs and society membership policy to include an exemption/amendment for Departmental Societies, or to amend the rules entirely to allow multi-year membership for all clubs and societies.

Are there any financial, resource or stakeholder/ public relations issues with this policy proposal?

Yes. Students' Union UCL consulted with the direct stakeholders for this policy proposal. That is, staff members who would be directly impacted by the policy or would have a role in implementing it. The following feedback was gathered:

Stakeholders recognised that a multi-year membership is something that a number of departmental societies have expressed wanting and would benefit from. It would indicate to non-affiliated Departmental Societies that we are able to adapt to their needs and could encourage more Departmental Societies to consider affiliating, and also aid in the relationships between Departmental Societies and the Students' Union. However, a number of logistical issues were raised about the current proposal and its implementation:

- Committee autonomy and decision making. It was raised that, under current society committee regulations, each newly elected society committee has the right to set the price of their membership each year. If multi-year memberships were introduced, the price may have been set by a committee a number of years ago which would prevent the new committee from making

decisions about their funding and membership price that is relevant to their group for that year. The cost for societies to run events and programmes each year does change, for example, due to inflation changes or cost of living increases. Therefore, prices could become outdated if committee members are unable to change the membership price each year.

- Membership pricing refunds. Once a membership price has been set and products (e.g. memberships) have been sold, we are not able to change the price of the existing product as this is unfair to students who have already purchased the product. Furthermore, students may graduate or interrupt their studies prior to their multi-year membership ending, which could result in requests for refunds or partial refunds which would be a substantial administrative burden on the Union and be difficult to ensure fairness and consistency between individual cases.
- Financial cost to students. A multi-year membership would be more expensive in the first instance, which could cause a greater financial burden to students looking to purchase at the start of the year and disadvantaged students unable to afford a higher cost outright.
- Society committee elections and the 28-day rule. Memberships are used to assess whether or not a student is eligible to stand or vote in society committee elections. This is to ensure that those voting and standing are genuine, active members of the society. It is also to prevent a candidate from unfairly influencing a vote by having a large volume of new members join the society just to vote for them. By having multi-year memberships, you would instead have students who purchased a membership years ago eligible to vote or stand, even if they are not active members of the society.
- Monitoring society engagement. Active memberships (that is, students who have purchased a membership that year) allows for the Union to track engagement with clubs and societies. This is helpful for both health and safety procedures, and for insurance purposes. It is also useful for ensuring that Union resources are being used in the most effective way, which is why we require societies to have at least 30 active members. Multi-year memberships may make it more difficult to monitor genuine engagement and active memberships in societies.
- Non-Departmental Societies. If we allowed multi-year memberships for Departmental Societies, we would have to allow this for all clubs and societies to ensure it is fair.
- Technical implementation of multi-year memberships. It has been noted that on a technical level, implementing multi-year memberships would be possible, but complex. It was also noted that there may be other solutions for the issues raised by the proposers, such as automated “please re-join” emails that could be sent to members at the end of the academic year.

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

The Union would need to determine exactly which policy(s) need to be amended to allow multi-year membership for departmental societies. The Union would also need to establish what an acceptable fee for a multi-year membership would be. Communication of this new option would be important, particularly for the new academic year where many students will be looking to purchase new, or renew existing, memberships.