

Briefing – Policy Proposal

Date: 21/02/2024

Audience: Activities and Engagement Zone

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

Remote and Taster Memberships

Free club and society memberships were introduced as 'remote memberships' in spring 2020. This was in response to the pandemic and the unprecedented changes to student life. The Students' Union took this decision to ensure that disadvantaged students were not prevented from joining communities at UCL just because they were unable to be in London or engage in in-person activity.

In 2022/23, remote memberships became 'taster memberships'. This formed part of the Union's work to ease the cost-of-living crisis that students were facing.

The Students' Union is committed to creating an accessible club and society programme. 'Taster memberships' have enabled students facing financial hardship to 'try before they buy', apply for funding to join the club through the Participation Fund¹, and then join as a full member if they wish. This approach has led to an overall increase in the number of unique paying members over the last two years.

Importantly, clubs and societies are able to determine what activities taster members are able to engage with.

Creating an accessible and inclusive club and society programme was the primary motivator for introducing taster memberships. However, taster memberships have also:

- Provided an easier and more robust process for students to join groups during the Welcome period with due regard for data protection requirements, replacing Welcome Fair sign-up lists.
- Enabled the Students' Union to effectively understand who is involved in club and society activity throughout the year. The Union currently supports over 400 clubs and societies. To ensure safeguarding, health and safety and insurance requirements are fulfilled, the Union needs to know which students are engaged in club and society activity at all times.
- For students on study abroad or students not able to get to campus for regular in person activity, taster memberships also provided a route to gain some of the benefits of joining student communities.

Guidance Provided to Clubs and Societies

Currently, there is some confusion around how taster memberships function. The Union provides guidance on taster memberships through core online training, Welcome Back Briefings at the beginning of the year, and through regular email updates to presidents and treasurers. This is also supported through some guidance on the website, and the societies team will continue to look at additional options to help provide clarification and support, e.g. through how-to-guides and training.

¹ <https://studentsunionucl.org/advice-and-support/support/participation-fund-contact-form>

An example of guidance sent to club and society presidents and treasurers is provided below:

“Students can buy free taster membership for your club/society at any point in the year. This gives students a chance to see if your group is right for them before committing to paid membership.

No one can take part in any of your activities without a minimum of taster membership – this includes online meetings and group chats. The membership is completely free so no excuses!

Taster members are allowed to stand and vote in all club/society elections (as long as they meet all other eligibility criteria like being a member for 28 days). Other than this, it’s up to you what taster members can access.”

As part of the support the Union offers to clubs and societies, some additions in the future could include:

- An automated system whereby taster members are prompted to upgrade their membership if they would like to do so after 28 days.
- Setting up an additional filter on the club/society membership page to allow presidents/treasurers to filter for different types of membership without needing to download a CSV file first.

Elections

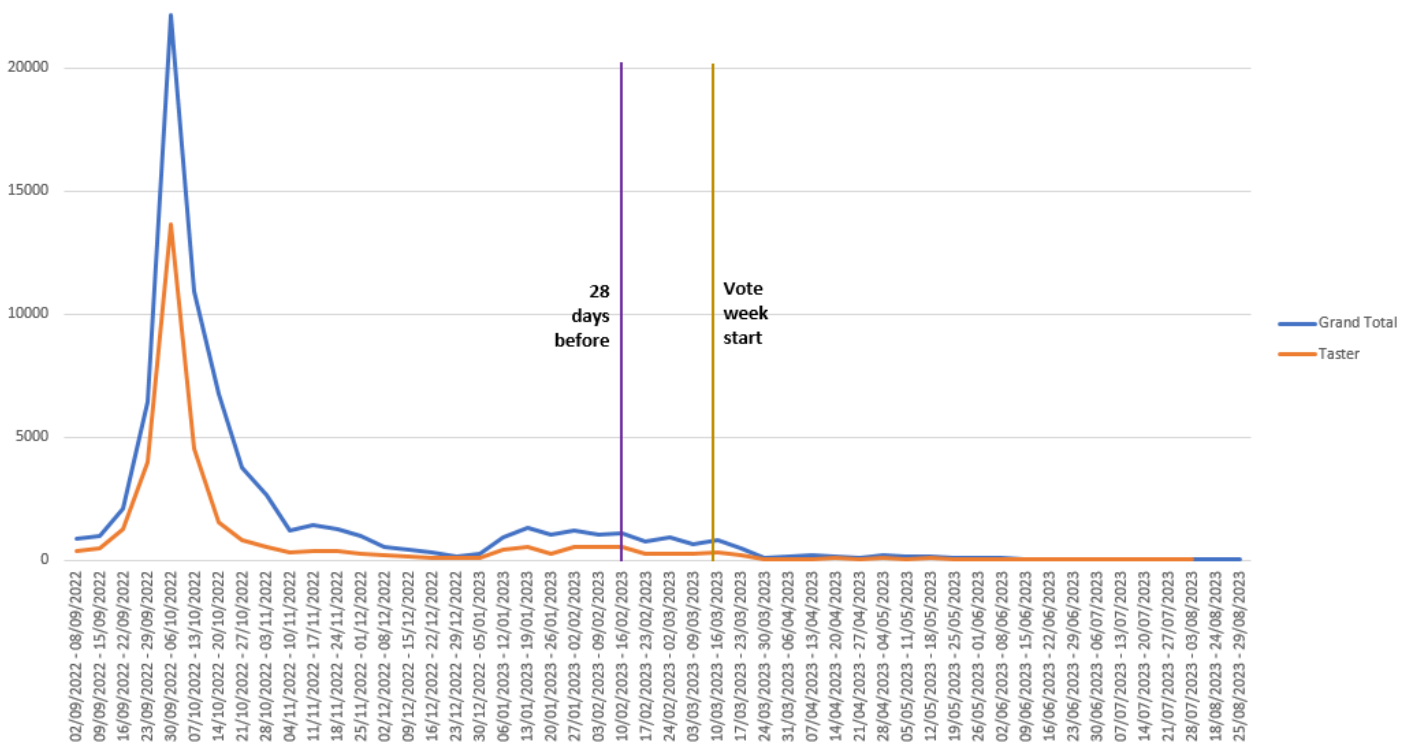
The policy proposal primarily is concerned with the voting rights of students with taster memberships in club and society elections.

- Currently, taster members can stand and vote in club and society elections.
- Students need to have been a member of the relevant club or society for a minimum of 28 days before being able to stand or vote in club and society elections. This rule was introduced in the 2011/12 academic year following the creation of online membership products. This rule is in place to safeguard against elections being swayed by a number of students joining a group just before an election is held.

The proposal raises the concern that election results could be altered by individuals gathering supporters 28 days in advance of an election and asking them to purchase free taster membership in order to vote. A specific concern is also raised around students attempting to undermine, intimidate or interfere with the operation of smaller groups in particular.

- Under our election rules this would be considered as early campaigning, and if reported as an election complaint, appropriate sanctions would be put in place to address any material effects on the outcome of the election. However, there is a concern that issues like this might go unreported and therefore interventions might not always be possible in time.

The graph below shows the number of students joining clubs and societies each week with taster membership in 2022-23 (orange line), alongside non-taster memberships (blue line). The date marking 28 days before the start of vote week in the Leadership Race is indicated on the graph. The data does not show a peak in taster membership sales 28 days before voting opens.



Note: In 2022/23 12 students held a taster membership only, without also holding a paid membership. This means there were 21,411 students that held at least one full paid membership.

What would change if the policy was successful?

Taster members would not be able to run or vote in club and society elections unless they convert their membership to full membership before the election.

The Union would need to create a solution to ensure that exceptions could be made for study abroad or other students on a case-by-case basis running for relevant positions to ensure that legitimate candidates were always able to run in elections.

What is the relevant national / international context to this situation?

N/A

Are there any legal implications to this policy proposal?

N/A

Does this relate to any existing Union policy?

N/A

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

Reasonable resources will be deployed in terms of staff time and systems alternations to enable the change. There may be a need for additional staff time to be spent on administration around the period of elections.

Are there any sustainability implications to this policy proposal?

No

Are there any equity and inclusion implications to this policy proposal?

The removal of voting rights for taster membership would impact students involved in club and society activity who do not have paid membership (this can be for a variety of reasons). It would create a barrier to engagement and participation where there currently isn't one and impact the accessibility of the activities programme and student leadership positions.

What would the next steps be if the proposal passed?

The Systems and Societies teams will work to implement the changes in time for the next election cycle – starting with the Rep Election in October 2024.