

Policy Proposal: Closing the Taster Membership Electoral Loophole

What would you like the Union to do?

The Union should take active steps to maintain the integrity of club and society elections by revoking the voting status of taster members. In the long term, the Union should also conduct a review of taster memberships to determine whether they are fit for purpose.

Why would you like to do this?

Currently, taster membership is free of charge, and any student who becomes a taster member of any club or society for over 28 days can vote and stand in their elections. This means that anyone wishing to alter the results of a club or society election can do so by gathering enough supporters - regardless of whether or not they are in the club or society - to sign up for taster membership 28 days in advance.

This loophole poses a particular problem for smaller clubs and societies with fewer members. In the recent term 1 by-election, only 4 of the 10 clubs or societies with the highest turnout had more than 30 members voting in the election [1]. This means that it only takes a handful of people to sway the results at no cost to those wishing to do so.

In a policy meeting in November, Head of Societies & Projects Rupinder Sandal (RS) commented that clubs and societies with fewer than 20 voting members may want to 'nominate [themselves] for disaffiliation', given that the minimum number of members for any club or society to remain affiliated is 30. This policy notes, however, that voter turnout should not be conflated with student interest. It also notes that this loophole is not unique to small societies. Earlier this year, The Cheese Grater reported that the president of the Economics and Finance Society (EFS) 'paid off students on WeChat to vote for him' using the same mechanism [2].

There appears to be a fundamental misunderstanding within the Union over the purpose of taster membership. Introduced as 'remote' membership in 2019/2020 (AZ1905), the original purpose of the category was to allow students to continue participating in clubs and societies while Covid regulations were in place. Two years later, RS proposed to the Zone (AZ2105) to rename 'remote' membership to 'taster' membership. The minutes, however, do not indicate any discussion of the substantive changes to the category, and they remain functionally identical to this day [3].

It is clear that the purpose of taster membership is different from its Covid predecessor. We know this not only because of RS' proposal to rename the category but also from the way she characterised it to the Zone in

AZ2204. RS noted that the point of taster membership was to ‘allow students to join a club at any point’, adding that it was the Union’s priority to make clubs and societies ‘as accessible as possible’, since ‘not every student is eligible for the Participation Fund’.

However, in the same meeting, RS noted that taster membership is ‘not meant to be a permanent way to join a club [or society]’, even advising members to implement rules to exclude taster members from certain events; it is unclear how taster memberships are supposed to remove financial barriers to participation [4].

Likewise, it is also unclear how taster membership, being functionally identical to its Covid-era predecessor, can suddenly shift from serving one purpose (connecting distance learners) to another (removing financial barriers to participation) without any substantive changes to its formal structure.

Consequently, this policy argues that RS has mistakenly characterised the purpose of taster membership to the Zone in AZ2204. It argues that the purpose of taster membership is not to ‘remove financial barriers’ since, according to an email sent out by the Union on 8 January, it is ultimately ‘up to [each club and society] what taster members can access’. It argues, rather, that students understand taster membership to be what its name suggests: a taste test of what a club or society has to offer. On this view, taster members need not, and should not be given the right to participate in club or society elections; just as one would not go to an ice cream shop, ask for a taste test, and demand to have a say in the future operation of the ice cream shop.

To be clear, this policy does not propose to cancel taster membership altogether. It does not question the decision behind granting remote members parity in voting rights because of the high number of distance learners both during Covid and shortly after restrictions were lifted. The point here is that functionally speaking, taster membership, as it stands, is a relic of the Covid era, and the Union’s failure to update the mechanism of the category to fit its stated purpose has enabled a loophole that is currently normalising electoral fraud in our clubs and societies.

This policy, therefore, calls for the loophole to be closed to ensure the integrity of our club and society elections.

How will this affect students?

In certain career-based societies - especially those with direct ties to large corporations - there is a significant incentive to win a committee position. While the loophole of getting enough supporters to get a taster membership in advance to sway an election is technically against Union regulations on account of it being considered as ‘campaigning before the campaign period has begun’, this is often incredibly difficult - if not

impossible - to prove. Likewise, there is nothing stopping students from rigging an election of a rival society to destabilise its sitting committee by voting reopen nominations (RON) en masse.

Closing the loophole would ensure the integrity of our club and society elections. If democracy means anything, it means making sure that the people we vote for have a genuine stake in the community and are interested in making it better for everyone, not just themselves. Closing the loophole also protects smaller clubs and societies from bullying and intimidation by others.

That being said, the practical impact on the student body is likely to be minimal. RS stated in AZ2204 that the loophole was 'not a mass concern', as students with taster membership and who 'are not actively involved in a club are unlikely to run for or stand in elections'. This is not to mention that this policy does not bar taster members from standing in elections, recognising the possibility of those studying abroad who might wish to run for a committee position when they return to UCL.

If anything, the main benefactors of this policy are likely to be the clubs and societies themselves. RS noted in AZ2204 that she would consider excluding taster members from the voting demographic, which impacts the turnout rate and, hence, the extra funding awarded for high turnout. This policy hopes to achieve the same effect.

References

[1] 'Live statistics | Students Union UCL'. Accessed: Jan. 11, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://studentsunionucl.org/election/club-society-term-1-by-election/dashboard>

[2] 'Issue 85 - Freshers 2023 by The Cheese Grater - Issuu'. Accessed: Jan. 11, 2024. [Online]. Available: https://issuu.com/cheesegratermagazine/docs/freshers_issue_aw23

[3] 'Activities Zone Current Projects and Events | Students Union UCL'. Accessed: Jan. 11, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://studentsunionucl.org/activities-zone-current-projects-and-events>

[4] 'Activities Zone | Students Union UCL'. Accessed: Jan. 11, 2024. [Online]. Available: <https://studentsunionucl.org/make-a-change/zones/activities-zone>