HELLO
Running from Office:
Going beyond representative democracy to engage students in educational change

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OVERVIEW

• Who is “hard to reach”?
• Reviewing our democracy
• Other models of engagement: Academic societies and networks
• The perks and pitfalls of moving beyond academic representation
Who is ‘hard to reach’ at Bristol SU?

Well, that depends...
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- “Hard to reach” means different things for different types of engagement or activities
- Some groups are more “hard to reach” across a range of activities (PG, international, part-time, etc)
- “Hard to reach” can be very different for the SU compared to the University
- Goes beyond demographics - personality, politics, priorities all come into play
- The opportunity needs to match the individual
Who is ‘hard to reach’ at Bristol SU?

Representation and partnership activities

Representation and partnership activities seek to involve students as co-creators of their education. They can do this through:

- Informing
- Shaping
- Co-creating

In a representative system, co-creation often gets left to the reps. What does this mean for those we struggle to engage through this system?
Reviewing our democratic engagement

Consulting the ‘hard to reach’

- Conducted a major review of our democracy in 2015/16, with specific aim of broadening engagement

- Couldn’t just rely on reps and officers - needed to find those the system wasn’t reaching

- Interviewed over 200 “lay students” on campus, exploring their understanding, experiences and motivations
Reviewing our democratic engagement

What were the themes?

- **Low motivation to engage** - the majority had not tried to engage with SU democracy, so motivation issues rather than barriers were the main problem.

- **Time poor** - students are time poor, and must be able to understand why a particular activity is worthwhile compared to other things they could be doing - study, work, social life, etc.

- **High trust** - students seem to trust reps and officers to do the right thing and aren’t strongly motivated by holding them to account.
Reviewing our democratic engagement

What were the themes?

- **Personal Interest** - students want to be able to get involved if there is a particular issue or campaign area they care about, but wouldn’t want to engage on every issue.

- **Effectiveness** - students can perceive collective action as being a lot of effort and would need to be confident of the impact of the SU’s campaigns before getting involved.
Reviewing our democratic engagement

What did we learn?

- Some will be motivated to dedicate time to democracy on principle, but the vast majority will not and different opportunities need to be available to cater to this.

- Engagement needs to have clear benefits - to the individual and to a cause they care about - to convince students to dedicate their time.

- Engagement needs to be flexible, allowing for students to take part when they feel it is relevant.

How can we provide opportunities for co-creation that meet these different needs?
Beyond representative democracy

Other opportunities for co-creation

What opportunities could our clubs and societies provide?

What can we learn from our student groups when setting up new opportunities for co-creation?
Bristol SU Academic Societies
Building vibrant learning communities

- 48 Academic Societies
- 8042 Members
- One third of the student population
- 21 Groups between 100-1100 members
- 27 Groups with under 100 members

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Bristol SU Academic Societies

Building vibrant learning communities

Academic Society Drinks
run in partnership with University

- Peer to peer support
- Forum for feedback
- Forum for engagement in educational strategy
Bristol SU Academic Societies

Building vibrant learning communities

Academic Community Building

- Speaker Series
- Parenting/Mentoring Schemes
- Alumni Networks
- Trips
- Community Engagement
Beyond representative democracy

Other opportunities for co-creation

**What opportunities could our clubs and societies provide?**

- Social engagement/benefits
- Communities that students identify with
- Flexible to engage with – engage at multiple levels
- Multiple pathways in – first step isn’t running for election
  - Learn, Act, Engage, Create
- Builds networks for reps and student leaders
- Strong element of DIY, not just ‘representing’

**What can we learn from our student groups when setting up new opportunities for co-creation?**
Student Networks

Black Students’ Network Case Study

• You can join them like a society
• You can go to their events or participate in campaigns and research
• You can organise your own events, projects and campaigns
• Creates a community or network around a shared interest
Student Networks

Black Students’ Network Case Study

- Black History Month
  - Speakers including Bristol Archives, Akala
- Black Lives Matter
  - City-wide demonstrations and events, worked with local councillors
- BME attainment gap project
  - Research participants and researchers
  - Be part of developing recommendations for report
- Why is my curriculum white campaign?
  - Work with course reps
  - Holds events to encourage debate
  - Liberated Library
- Work with local charities, held career events, involved in city’s creative networks

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## The perks and pitfalls of working outside academic representation

### Perks
- Provide students with rich array of opportunities (including co-creation)
- Empowers groups of students to work together with each other and with staff at Uni and SU
- Reaches students who are not motivated to engage with representative system
- Can compliment the representation system – reps able to network with groups of interested students and consult
- Builds community and pride

### Pitfalls
- No clear lines of accountability
- Who comes forward comes forward
- Risk of competing/siloed interest groups
- Risk of undermining or circumventing representation system
- Risk of completely DIY (no partnership)
THANK YOU

Any questions?

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