

A Policy System for BUSU

Please note: this is a long document. A summary of the system is on page 3, with the detail of each step in section 2 (pages 5-10).

Comments are particularly sort on the summary (page 3), the timeline on pages 9-10 and the issues in section 4 (pages 10-11), and more broadly on any **outstanding questions (in red)**.

Throughout *comments are in grey*.

0: Introduction

0.1 What is Policy?

Policies are agreed principles or procedures that are used to guide decision-making. Within the Students' Union policies might set principles ('The SU will not advertise chocolate companies'), create rules for parts of the SU ('Sports club committees must wear violet hoodies') or set the direction of the SU's work ('The SU will prioritise campaigning to reduce 8.15s over 6.15s').

0.2 The Present

At the moment policies within the SU are decided by the sabbatical team or the SU's Board of Trustees. While there are records in minutes of decisions, they are often not separately written down, so it is hard for students to find what the SU's position on something is. On very contentious issues, the sabbs often consult students before taking a decision, but there is no process to do this, making it difficult and unclear for everyone involved. The only way for a student with an idea to make a policy is to either convince a sabb to take it forward or hold a referendum (which requires a petition of around 400 students to start and 5% of students voting to pass).

The nine student-led sub-groups of the SU, run by their executive committees, have the ability to make policy decisions for their individual areas. The boundaries on this power are often unclear.

0.3 The Proposal

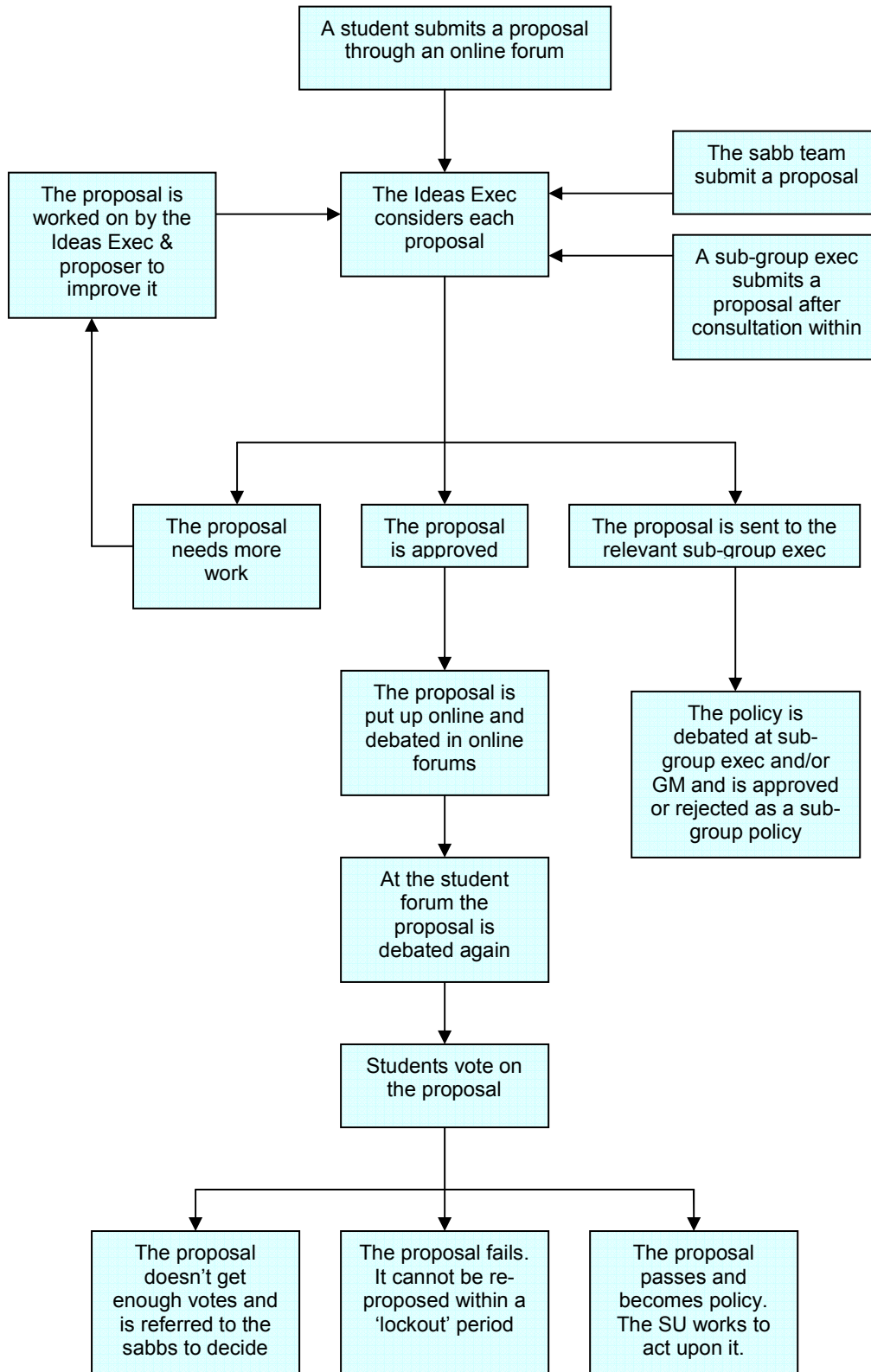
What follows is an outline for union-wide procedures for setting policies in which students are empowered to make decisions and can also propose their own ideas. This will achieve several things:

- A more democratic system of decision-making, where sabbatical officers have clearer direction from students as to what they want
- A simple way for students to feed their ideas and shape their union directly
- An alternative to the cumbersome referendum procedure

The proposal follows an idea from its inception to adoption as policy. At various stages different options are presented. The principle of the system proposed is that student involvement should be done mostly online (based on student feedback) and that the priority is to make it as simple as possible to get involved at any one stage of the process.

The aim is for the principle that sub-groups can make decisions affecting their area is to be preserved.

0.4) Process Outline



1) The Hub & the Committee

1.0) Online Democracy Hub

The suggestion is that an online 'Hub' be created on the Students' Union's website to host the policy system.

Firstly, it would include information on the processes, guidelines and contact information to help students propose their ideas and understand the system.

The Hub would host a 'current issues' section, where policies up for voting would be available, accompanied by a forum with a debate thread for each proposal. It would also include a forum for discussing ideas before they are actually proposed, to encourage students to debate and refine proposals.

It would be helpful when proposals are being voted on to have summaries of arguments put for and against in each thread. However, this would be time-consuming to produce and open to biasing.

Q1.0a: Who would be best placed to produce these summaries? Sabbs? Members of the Ideas Exec (see below)? The proposers themselves? Staff?

1.1) The Ideas Exec

NOTE: The title 'Ideas Exec' used throughout this document is a working title and not intended to be the committee's actual name. In particular, it will NOT be a sub-group executive alongside the others.

Q1.1a: What should this committee actually be called?

A committee will be created, made of the sabbatical team and five student members, which will meet five times a year to discuss proposals and administer the system. The Chief Executive of the Students' Union will be in attendance to advise the meeting.

The five students will recruited, and in the event of more than five people being interested, a cross-campus election will be held coinciding with Executive Committee elections.

The primary function of the committee will be to review and approve all proposals before they go to vote. It will also handle filtering policies to execs. Members of the committee will also be involved in assisting proposers of ideas in formulating them into actual proposals.

The five students is intended to create a balance of sabbs to students and provide enough people to manage the out-of-committee workload. Alternatives to direct election would be drawing the students from sub-group execs (already overstretched, difficult to guarantee numbers) or having an application & appointment system (harder to sell, less democratic). There is also a certain advantage to having the committee independent of the sub-groups.

Q1.1a: Is the make-up of the committee and the way students are selected appropriate?

There are three pre-existing alternative options to take the role of this committee:

- 1. Elections committee – this committee currently is responsible for referenda, which is a similar area. It also has an existing, independent student chair. However, the sabb elections are a big piece of work, and there are ideas about expanding its elections remit, so adding this may overwork it.*
- 2. The Review Panel – this committee has a naturally balanced membership and a certain level of legitimacy. It also has an independent external chair. However, adding these roles would create much more work for a large group of already hardworking students and could confuse its purpose somewhat.*
- 3. The Sabbatical Team – this puts a great deal of responsibility on the team for which it would be difficult to make them accountable for. It would also create more work for them as there would be no students to help with drafting etc.*

Q1.1b: Would one of the pre-existing alternatives be more appropriate than a new committee?

2) The Process

2.1) Stage 1: The Idea

If a student or group of students has an idea for something the SU should do they can submit it through an online form. They can do so either as a complete proposal, or simply as an idea to be explored, differentiated on the form.

The form will be of a similar format to the one used at Leeds Students Union (<http://www.leedsuniversityunion.org.uk/yourideas/>), with two boxes along the lines of 'What I want' and 'Why I want it'. The option to submit ideas anonymously will be included.

This meets the student desire for an anonymous channel, and is easy to access. The form will set the structure of a policy proposal.

The form will be accompanied by guidelines on what makes good proposals (i.e. realistic, not too limiting, backing up with evidence) and an explanation of how the process works.

This should reduce the amount of work needed at stage 2, as ideas should be better formed. It is important not to make the guidelines so onerous they are off-putting, however.

Q2.1a: Does the form have the appropriate boxes?

Q2.1b: Leeds divide policy into three 'zones' (better union, city and university), which runs through their entire process. It is not proposed this be adopted in this outline, but offering similar divisions on the form may focus student's ideas. Is this a good idea? Should the 'zoning' be adopted throughout the procedure?

Sub-groups will be able to directly make cross-Union proposals to the Ideas Exec (policies within their own area wont need to go to the Ideas Exec). These must come from the exec committees, and are made on behalf of the whole sub-group. How

these proposals are written and whether they have to be approved by a General Meeting (or equivalent) will be left to each sub-group to decide.

Q2.1c: Are more strict rules on having GMs approve proposals worthwhile?

A sabbatical officer, the sabbatical team as a whole, or the Students' Union's Board of Trustees may submit proposals to the Ideas Exec.

All proposals are then collected centrally for processing into stage 2.

2.2) Stage 2: Drafting

The Ideas Exec will meet and consider all the ideas which have been submitted, and for each one will do one of the following:

1. Approve the proposal as written, if it is complete.
2. If the idea/proposal only affects sub-group(s) of the SU, refer that idea to the exec committee(s) for the idea to be considered as a sub-group policy.
3. Assign someone to draft a proposal based on the idea.
4. Refer the idea back to its proposer and work with them to improve the proposal.

The committee will only take option three if:

1. The proposal conflicts with, replaces or amends existing policy – this can be fixed in most cases by changing the wording of the proposal (see section 5);
2. The proposal is unconstitutional or if adopted would break existing Union values (e.g. safe space) or responsibilities (i.e. it would break the law);
3. The committee feels the proposal needs rewriting because it is unclear, not detailed enough or doesn't meet the guidelines adequately;
4. There are serious concerns about the consequences of the proposal for the Union if passed.

In all cases where the idea is referred back, the emphasis will be on the committee working with the proposer to negotiate a solution to the problem so the idea can progress.

For proposals made anonymously, or for which the proposers no longer wish to take forward, the committee may decide whether or not to assign someone else to pursue it.

While it might be difficult to express in written rules, the power of the Ideas Exec is intended to only be used to ensure proposals are fair, well-written and appropriate, not to simply block unpopular ideas.

Q2.2a: What guidelines should be put in place, and where exactly should the line be drawn on the committee's power to hold up a proposal against a student's wishes?

Once a proposal has been approved, it will progress to the next stage.

2.3) Stage 3: Discussion

It is suggested there are five policy rounds each year (start early Oct, mid Nov, early Dec, late Feb, late March/early April). At the start of each round all proposals that are ready are published together in a batch.

Logic for the batch times: each batch requires some time before for ideas to be submitted and policies drafted. The idea is the first session deal mainly with sub-group and Students' Union proposals to get them sorted early, then two others in semester 1, and two in semester 2 timed to avoid exams and match sabb elections.

Q2.3a: Is the number of batches and the timings of them about right?

Q2.3b: Is an 'emergency override' needed so policies can be passed between batches when time is short? Who should be able to trigger this?

Voting on each proposal in the batch begins two weeks after the batch has been published.

Batching up proposals makes the management of the system easier. It gives students timelines to work to, without limiting them. It is also easier to promote voting to students and less interesting ideas might capture some attention brought in by more controversial topics. Batching does limit speedy decisions, however.

Q2.3c: Is two weeks long enough for good debate?

Each proposal will have a thread within the policy forums as part of the Hub, where students can debate the issue.

The five existing student forums will be rescheduled to take place on the last weekday before voting starts, and part of each forum will be dedicated to debating the proposals to be voted on in person. A transcript of the debate will be uploaded to the online debate forums.

This meets the requirements for both online and in person debate. Joining them with the existing forums will give those meetings more purpose.

Q2.3d: Student forums generally happen on a Friday, is this at the right time in the debate cycle (just before voting)?

Q2.3e: Is there enough time in the student forums? Would a separate set of meetings be better?

Q2.3f: Are any of the following alternatives better?:

Alternatives:

- i) A 'gate' system could be used, whereby a proposal is put online accompanied by a 'support' option (similar to Facebook 'likes'), and is put to the vote once it passes a threshold of 'supporters'.

The purpose of gating is to catch very unpopular proposals before they waste time. It is slower and more difficult to understand than alternatives.

- ii) Each proposal could be published individually when it is ready, then voting occurs two weeks after that publication.

This is faster for each policy, and more flexible, but again suffers from being more confusing and harder to promote.

- iii) The proposals could be published individually when ready but voted on in batches.

This avoids the voting confusion, but gives some policies much longer debate times than others. In practice, this will probably be the same as the system suggested.

2.4) Stage 4: The Decision

At the end of the two week debate period, voting will open online for all new proposals. The vote will be open for three days.

The suggestion of a three-day polling window is to keep voting periods short so as not to distract from bigger elections. If there a low turnouts, a week might work better.

Q2.4a: Is three days long enough for voting?

Each proposal will have a title that forms a question: 'Should the SU lobby the University for X', 'Should the SU build Y', etc. The ballot (which, technology permitting, will be a single list of the proposals with votes submitted together) will then have a Yes/No/Abstain option for each one.

Yes/No is easier to understand than For/Against in almost all cases, however, it is harder to write unbiased questions in this format. The suggestion is to take simplicity over potential fairness in this case.

Q24b: Is the ballot format the best design?

2.5) Stage 5: Implementation

There are three levels of outcome:

1. Below 500 students vote:

The proposal does not become SU policy, regardless of whether students vote 'Yes' or 'No'. The same or similar ideas may be submitted again for inclusion in a future batch and be re-debated and re-voted on.

The result is sent to the Students' Union's Management Group, who consider whether the SU wants to do some or all of the things in the proposal.

2. Between 500 and 1000 students vote:

If the proposal gets more 'Yes' votes than 'No' votes, it passes into policy for 3 years. Counter proposals and amendments may be submitted to future batches, and any such proposals that become policy override previous policies.

If the proposal gets more 'No' votes than 'Yes' votes then it fails and does not become policy. The original proposal or similar ideas may not be submitted again that semester.

3. Over 1000 students vote:

If the proposal gets more 'Yes' votes than 'No' votes, it passes into policy for 3 years, and no counter proposals or amendments may be submitted until after the end of the year.

If the proposal gets more 'No' votes than 'Yes' votes then it fails and does not become policy. The original proposal or similar ideas may not be submitted again until the end of the year.

Thresholds have been put in to make sure policy can't be hi-jacked without popular support. The lockout on re-submission is to prevent students spamming proposals until they get the desired outcomes, and mirrors existing rules.

Q2.5a: Are these thresholds at the right levels, and are the lockout times appropriate?

The sabbatical team will have an exception to the lockout period, allowing them to submit a counterproposal or amendment to any existing policies in any batch, although they may do so only once within the lockout time for each issue.

This is to allow the Students' Union to respond to a policy with reasonable alternatives. They still require student support.

At the end of each year the sabbatical team give a report at the student forum (and publish online a written version) which outlines the progress made in the year on each Union policy. A report on progress will also go to each meeting of the Review Panel.

In general, the guidelines for proposals about what the Students' Union should *do* (rather than, say, lobby for) will emphasise that the Students' Union should *investigate* doing something or be broad enough to allow the sabbs flexibility in meeting the policy's demands.

The Students' Union's Board of Trustees may overturn any policy (in line with the Articles of Governance) if it deemed to pose a serious financial, legal or reputational risk to the Students' Union.

2.6) Policy System Timeline

This is the outline timetable for each batch of the system:

- Week 1: The deadline for submitting ideas in time for the next vote is the Wednesday of this week.
- Week 2: The Ideas Exec meets on the Tuesday and processes all current idea proposals. Some proposals are agreed to be amended or referred back to their proposers.
- Week 3: The Ideas Exec approves any fixed proposals by email with a deadline of the Tuesday. The following three days are used to prepare for publishing.
- Week 4: All approved proposals are posted online on the Monday with accompanying online forum threads. Publicity for proposals and voting begins.

- Week 5: The Student Forum is held on the Friday and all proposals are debated.
- Week 6: Voting opens on the Monday and closes on the Wednesday. Results are published on the Thursday.

3) The Sub-group Question

Under this system, sub-groups would be limited to setting policy on their area-specific things that only affect students in the sub-group. They would not be able to set broad policy for the whole Union, even if it was on topics related to their function.

This would mean, for example, the Sports Association could set policies on SA kit or socials or club requirements, but not on union-wide sponsorship or on the Union's political position on recreational sport. Likewise, the Academic sub-group could set policies on reps attendance, rewards, standards of behaviour, and the Union's approach to the rep system, but not on academic issues such as the position on timetabling etc. It is expected, however, that the opinions and issues discussed at execs and in the sub-groups would be the basis of many of the proposals.

Students' Union policies would automatically override sub-group policies if the two conflicted.

Q3a: Would the alternative of allowing sub-groups to pass much broader policies be preferred? This would create problems of resolving the overlap and boundaries.

The alternative is at most as democratic and representative as the suggested system, and often less so. It is my strong opinion that the policy of the Union should be set by all students, not a small section, who are both self-selecting and often have a cost or election to gain access to them.

4) Outstanding Issues

There are a number of issues not addressed here:

1. In time-constrained situations, the SU may want to hold emergency policy votes to get student opinion on an emerging issue. A mechanism for this needs to be written.
2. The boundaries on policies have not been set, and would need to restrict what students could propose regarding the staffing, resourcing and management of the organisation. Policies on these issues should be set from an organisational point of view, through the Management Group and Board of Trustees. A consultation/notification mechanism will be built into The Hub.
3. Should the Students' Union's Referendum system (which is similar but more rigid) be integrated into this system, including constitutional changes and votes of no confidence in trustees?

4. A number of procedural points, such as who sets the order proposals are debated/appear on ballot forms, who chairs the student forums and how long discussions are allowed to take have not been set. It is suggested much of this will fall to the Ideas Exec to decide.
5. The 'language' of the system and policy in general needs to be carefully made so that it is easy to understand and engaging for students, unlike current vocabulary.
6. The Union should be impact assessing all policies, how this will be done and how it will integrate into the system needs to be decided.
7. The necessary staff support and financial costs need assessing before these suggestions can be agreed.

5) Implementation

The following steps are suggested to put this system into practice:

1. A finalised proposal be produced, with student feedback, and agreed by the Board of Trustees.
2. Bye-law 5 (Referenda) and 7 (Committees of the Board) and Regulations 1 (Sub-groups) and 5 (Referenda) be updated to incorporate this system.
3. Sub-group constitutions (which are currently under review) be updated to define their own policy mechanisms and powers.
4. The Hub and Committee be established in time for launch in Fresher's Week 2012.