



# SUMMARY OF STUDENT FEEDBACK

## FEEDBACK FROM FOCUS GROUP AND CO-CREATION WORKSHOP ON STUDENT REPRESENTATION AND DEMOCRACY

### Executive Summary

*From 2022, the Union of Brunel Students has been undergoing a democracy and representation review. Multiple co-creation workshop and focus group have been conducted between 2024–2026. Across 12 focus groups and co-creation workshops, students identified 3 reasons for Union of Brunel's declining engagement: low trust and weak officer accountability; elections driven by popularity rather than merit; limited visibility and accessibility of student leadership. Students expressed strong support for: greater accountability and scrutiny of officers; more accessible and inclusive participation routes and paid participation. Student Assembly will be restructured into Brunel66, a 66-member body organised into 3 thematic councils, enabling clearer representation, stronger accountability, and improved engagement. It embeds merit-based participation, with competency and introduces formal scrutiny and policy powers for students.*

## BACKGROUND

From 2022, the Union of Brunel Students has been undergoing a democracy and representation review. The aim for this review is to make our democracy and representation structures more accessible and inclusive; representative of Brunel's diverse student population; and effective in responding to and representing the evolving nature of student's needs. Over the past 3 years, the Union of Brunel Students have undertaken 3 different focus groups and co-creation workshops: March 2024, October 2024 and March 2026. The March 2024 democracy review was conducted by external consultant Alkhemy and consisted of 50 students across 2 full days. Both the October 2024 and March 2026 was conducted by the UBS Student Voice Team, with the October 2024 review consisting of 25 students and March 2026 review consisting of 24 students. The objective of these workshops was to explore Brunel students' perception of our democracy and representation structures, specifically focusing on our declining engagement; the barriers to participation experienced by our students; the fairness and effectiveness of our current system; and ways to reform the system. The findings show a clear and consistent pattern of dissatisfaction with the current Student Assembly model, alongside strong appetite for reform. For all 3 focus group phases we focused on the diversity of participants, both demographically and their previous engagement history with the Union. As a result of our democracy review the Union of Brunel Students, as approved by the Trustee Board and supported by the Student Assembly, has put forward a referendum to reform Union of Brunel Students' representation structures. The referendum is set to open **Monday 15<sup>th</sup> June at 10am** and will close **Friday 10<sup>th</sup> July at 5pm**.

## KEY FINDINGS

### WHAT'S WRONG WITH THE CURRENT SYSTEM?

#### ACCOUNTABILITY DEFICIT

In all 3 phases of the focus groups, students expressed significant concern about officer's lack of accountability, failure to communicate what they've achieved, and ordinary students' inability to challenge or scrutinise elected officers and student volunteers.

*Students felt they "could not, or did not know how to hold officers to account" – March 2024*

*"When, where, and how are their achieved objectives communicated? I am not aware of anything that has been achieved."- March 2026*

*"Currently part time officers are trying to pass off report without evidence/number" – March 2026*

*“Haven’t really seen what has been achieved over the years” – October 2024*

*“No wonder there is less participation from people. A complete waste of time, talent & efforts. Students expect transparency and no wonder this union is inefficient and worthless” – October 2024*

This is all underpinned by the fact they believe students nominate themselves for representative roles for their own personal self-interest (e.g. protect their friend from a vote of no confidence/censure or to enhance their CV). According to March 2024 focus groups, students are not confident that officers are acting in the interest of students. The perceived lack of integrity and accountability has led to low trust in student leadership and reduced perceptions of democratic legitimacy which in turn has resulted in decreased engagement with our representation structures.

---

## **ELECTIONS ARE SEEN AS INEFFECTIVE AND UNFAIR**

A dominant and repeated theme across all 3 focus group phases is that our elections reward popularity over capability, encourage aggressive or inappropriate campaigning, and exclude underrepresented groups. The excessive use of peer pressure and intimidation means that students have struggled to engage meaningfully with the process, and they often have no idea what the candidates plan to do in their role and why they should vote for them.

*“It feels like they’re harassing us for votes quite often.” – March 2026*

*“Voting for full time officers feels rigged.” - March 2026*

*“The way candidates are elected seems to be more based on popularity and not on what the candidates will do.” – October 2024*

*“Lost faith in Brunel Union and Politics” – October 2024*

*““It’s always been a popularity contest. Candidates who are actually worthy of the role never win” – October 2024*

*“They don’t actually care to tell you about their manifesto. They just harass you to vote for them” – October 2024*

All 3 focus groups mentioned candidates’ and campaigners’ use of intimidation and coercion, with both the March 2024 and October 2024 focus group participants mentioning bribery and inappropriate incentives (e.g. alcohol and vapes). Candidates and campaigners relied on intimidation, peer pressure, and badgering as opposed to communicating the candidates’ goals and ability – which in turn led to the voters having a limited understanding of both the candidates and/or the role they’re campaigning for. This perpetuates students’ lack of perceived legitimacy and trust in election outcomes, contributing further to students disengaging from our elections.

---

## LOW VISIBILITY & AWARENESS

In all 3 phases of focus groups, students cited not knowing exactly what the officers do and their objective as a significant barrier to participating in our elections. Students feel disconnected from their representatives as they feel like once the candidates are elected, they no longer strive to engage with the students they're meant to be serving. Due to officer's lack of visibility and perceived ineffectiveness/lack of achievement, students expressed feeling apathetic to both elections and officers. The lack of awareness and understanding of our representation and democratic structures has prevented students from engaging or challenging our student representatives, as they do not know where or how to raise issues.

*Haven't seen much of the officers or what they do mainly it's just the officers' friends forcing you to vote"*  
– October 2024

*"No wonder there is less participation from people. A complete waste of time, talent & efforts. Students expect transparency and no wonder this union is inefficient and worthless"* – October 2024

*"Right now, they seem hidden and inaccessible."* - March 2026

*"Lack of visibility for the average student. To engage with the assembly does not seem easy and a lot of the campaigns are disruptive when people are standing outside of CostCutter"* - March 2026

*"After elections, I don't know what the officers do."* – October 2024

*"When, where, and how are their achieved objectives communicated? I am not aware of anything that has been achieved–"* March 2026

---

## **BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION AND INCLUSION**

---

### **TIME & FINANCIAL RESTRAINTS**

In all 3 phases of focus groups, students mentioned the time and financial constraints concerned with volunteering their time as a significant reason for not engaging with our democracy and representation structures. The cost-of-living increase and inflation; stagnation in SFE maintenance loans (for home students); and changes in the geopolitical environment preventing students from accessing money from back home (for international students) has increased students' need to secure part time employment. The need for supplementary income, academic pressures and need to prioritise their mental health (e.g. rest, exercise and socialising) means students can no longer financially or mentally afford to volunteer their already restricted time. When asked what has stopped students from putting themselves forward to run in elections, they responded with the following:

*"I have one million other responsibilities and like to actually get paid for my work"*

*“I will not get enough time for that”*

*“Fearing to lose focus on my studies”*

*“I have a hard and bust schedule”*

---

## **DIVERSITY & INCLUSION BARRIERS**

Participants also mentioned the accessibility democratic process, specifically how elections only suit certain personality types and those who are less extroverted but more competent than popular candidates are excluded. Despite protected seats and dedicated roles for women and home students, we lack meaningful participation from these demographics (i.e. they are failing to nominate themselves for the elected roles). This has a direct influence on our home and women students voting within our elections, as we know that when students feel represented in their candidates, they are more like to vote and engage with our elections and representation structures.

*“Not all demographics vote.” – March 2026*

*“Elections can sometimes feel like a popularity contest, where those who are more outgoing or well-known have an advantage, even if others may have stronger skills or experience for the role” – October 2024*

*“It often feels like the process is limited to certain groups of people who repeatedly participate and support their own, making it difficult for others to have a fair chance” – October 2024*

*“Its obvious who's going to win the roles. Everyone knows you have to have an in with the Hindu society”*

*“There are the main few societies who have engaged with our politics and assembly for longer and as a result have dominated it for some time, thus other societies don't interact as a result. In addition, the size of these societies makes it difficult for smaller societies and clubs to get their views across; thus the officers elected are only representative of their society rather than all other societies on campus.”*

## **WHAT DO STUDENTS WANT TO SEE**

### **DESIRE FOR IMPROVED REWARD & RECOGNITION**

Both participants in the October 2024 review and March 2026 focus groups expressed the need for and importance of paid roles. Students believe that paid roles would increase student commitment and motivation, which in turn would improve the outcomes of student representation. Paying students for their participation and engagement would attract more capable candidates as it wouldn't restrict participation to students who could mentally or financially afford to afford to volunteer their time.

*“Paid roles would encourage people who are serious about the role to apply.” – October 2024*

*“They will be more accountable because they are being paid.” – October 2024*

---

## DESIRE FOR CLEARER STRUCTURE AND PURPOSE

In all 3 phases of focus group, students stated that the current representation and democracy structure is confusing, difficult to navigate, and unclear in responsibility. Students don't know who does what, where to go to raise an issue or who to speak to. Specifically, students struggled to identify the role or objective of Student Assembly and the members and activity of the Executive Committee.

*"The hierarchy is kinda tough to comprehend." – November 2025*

## HOW BRUNEL66 RESOLVES IDENTIFIED ISSUES

In the December 2025 Annual General Meeting, students voted to restructure our democracy and representation structures based on 3 statements of change. Developed in response to the findings of the democracy review and guided by three core statements, Brunel 66 introduces a restructured democratic model. It replaces the Student Assembly with a 66-member body organised into three thematic councils, designed to enhance representation, increase accountability, and drive more effective engagement.

- **Strengthening Accountability** - Students would value the ability to scrutinize officers and students elected or recruited into roles of responsibility. There should be regular structured meetings that allow officers to be held to account and rebuild trust.
- **Moving beyond elections** – Application and competency-based recruitment with Student Volunteers and Council members that moves away from cross-campus voting and incorporates expertise and experience overriding the prominence of popularity in unfair elections.
- **Increased visibility & clarity** – The introduction of 3 clearly defined councils and representation pathways, and the clarification of escalation routes, will help resolve confusion and increase students' awareness.
- **Improving Accessibility & Inclusion** – The increase from 42 Student Assembly members to 66 members, in conjunction with the integration of Student Networks, Senior Academic Reps, PGR students and Student Activities students' group, will improve the depth and breadth of diversity and representation of Brunel's democracy and representation structures.
- **Alignment with Student Priorities** - The 3 dedicated councils structured around 3 main aspects of student life (e.g. education, wellbeing and community/ social life) will ensure that we are helping to make a difference on issues that are most impactful and relevant.

- **Effective Reward & Recognition** – The paid Volunteer Facilitator roles will resolve issues with a lack of commitment and motivation, as each of the 6 Volunteer Facilitator roles will have to have their £55 per week stipend signed off the Student Voice Manager. This will ensure a certain level of professionalism (e.g. formal expectations and accountability).

---

## STUDENTS THOUGHTS ON BRUNEL66

Overall, students seemed to indicate that they thought the proposed system would be a welcomed change and improvement to our current democracy and representation structure. Students indicated that they would be encouraged to get involved. Though many students felt that this had the potential to be a positive change, they emphasized that along with this change must come a strong accountability structure and metrics to ensure that this was effective.

*“Yes it’s more diverse than its ever been allowing for more input from people who would normally get involved”*

*“Yes, as the new structure settles there is more direction and it's clearer. I feel like more will be done to aid students”*

*“I think only time will tell, but it looks like it’s headed for the right direction.”*

*“I think in principle it should be more effective based on the information, but also based on today's discussion measures should also be taken to control what’s going on”*