Exeter Guild Students' Union

Democracy Review led by Democratic Society

Case Study with Thomas Barass - Head of Student Engagement, Exeter Guild Students' Union

Why did you undertake a democracy review? What was the problem?

We initiated the process due to a lack of engagement from the student body in the organisation's democratic structures. There were a number of problems we identified around the complexity of our systems and structures, and the types of students who were engaged, who were demographically niche - those who are usually engaged. A lot of the discussions were procedural rather than about how to make impactful change. Our aspiration was to engage more students and empower more regular discussion about changemaking, both within the Guild, University and beyond.

What happened? Describe the work

A Democracy Review was initiated by the Guild in 2020. It resulted in a model that was more streamlined, with reduced complexity, but perhaps went too far so that there wasn't much engagement. There weren't enough fresh ideas or thinking. Our Chief Exec wanted to be more radical, rather than arriving at ideas and actions akin to shuffling the deck chairs around. We didn't want to just copy the trend from other Student Unions and recycle what's been done 10-15 years ago. We wanted to look beyond the sector towards wider democratic participation and engagement, to design something that's more meaningfully engaging the wider student body. Workshops in August 2021. It was important to unpick our understanding of democracy beyond the sector norm; in fact, to look outside the sector for inspiration, to challenge people on their assumptions of what is effective democracy and student engagement. By opening this up with our staff, we were able to and move beyond rigid by-laws.

We focussed on training and capacity building, reviewing our internal capacity and resource structures to facilitate student engagement. Our Student Voice function which leads on our representation work, had previously focused on the academic side of student representation, rather than wider campaigning. We started looking at how to upskill this team to enable them to enact changemaking. We also

delivered Democracy Lab style events with our staff, to give not just a theoretical understanding of changemaking but some practical testing of this in reality.

How involved were you in the work?

It changed throughout. I was keeping a top level oversight of the direction we were trying to go, constantly challenging internally and asking if we were pushing this far enough. I encouraged staff to look at what we were taking from Demsoc and change our understanding of our structures, staff and capacity internally. We were able to carry on experimenting, e.g. through running Democracy Labs.

I pushed forward with changes to our elections systems, improving our student representation but also asking how we can have student engagement in different ways. Our thinking was taken to our Board for approval on what might ordinarily have been seen as a risky approach to engagement across the sector.

How did it go? Highlights and lowlights.

Highlight - Lightbulb moment was realising that we didn't have to replace our existing outdated model with another, slightly less outdated model. Why are we trying to create one single perfect model? Why aren't we engaging flexibly with students about their needs? Instead, we realised we could use lots of models and approaches and adapt to what's needed. This has shaped our mentality and given a good impetus and direction for us to move forward.

Lowlight - not being able to engage enough students in the Democracy Lab work in October, because we weren't in the right place internally. After this we realised our staff weren't in the right place due to vacancies, and we had to build from the ground up. It also made us realise what was feasible and realistic to do with this review.

How easy was it to carry out the review?

Challenging, more from our point of view due to staff changes and departures over the last few months. In terms of engaging with Demsoc point of view, it's been good and easy working together as much as we can given the capacity we had. Particularly the Democracy Lab, it was really easy integrating and working with Demsoc and getting new staff up to speed and challenging each other. There were challenges in terms of how much commitment we can give to it at certain points (capacity-wise).

What did you enjoy?

The August workshop was great for challenging our concepts and understanding. I enjoyed being devil's advocate and challenging our comprehension of student voice and engagement. We spent really meaningful time together as an organisation. It was also a great opportunity for me personally as I'd recently started, so it was a good chance to get to grips with the organisation's approach.

Anything you didn't enjoy?

Not necessarily being able to implement and pioneer as much as I'd have liked to, due to capacity and staffing issues, and needing to take people along with us and make sure everyone was up to speed.

What did you learn?

As an organisation, we learned to be more radical and be more confident to understand what we really want to achieve. We also spent time thinking about how we can sell this - not just to students - but to unpack the questions for the Board.

Students don't know what they don't know - they only know the ways they've been engaged up to this point. How do you get across and acknowledge that from a staff point of view, without disregarding student voice?

What were the main results?

Changing our mindset of what we are looking for. The usual question for SUs is: *"What model can be used to replace a current model?"* But we got to a point of asking *"Who are we to decide on a new model? Why does it have to be one model?"*

We've unpicked the concept that we need a single structure or model to represent or engage students. It's now going to be a portfolio model / toolkit, to meet students where they are at, rather than forcing them through our bureaucracy.

Other results are around training and resources to get students to actively engage in changemaking rather than to get involved in exclusionary Board meetings. For example, we've replaced the manifesto process with elections based on *why* students are better for the role (there used to be a 6-month gap between election manifestos being written and student reps starting in their posts).

What outcomes have you achieved so far?

We've changed our structures from a traditional approach to one that is based more on community organising. We've published a concept from students, with positive feedback and been approached by other Student Unions who have been interested in the work we're doing.

Staff understand the new mentality and approach, and we have new staff roles, driven in part by this new way of doing things. We had a small Voice Team before, with a single manager. It was very academic, and there was a real lack of engagement with wider democratic and liberation-based work.

We now have a community representation manager / coordinator, alongside the academic representation. We are investing in staff capacity to engage with the wider demographic of our student

body, and have allocated funding over the next few years to plough more resources into community representation.

What was the most significant change?

Developing our overarching mindset of where we're investing our time. We had wasted a substantial amount of staff time with one niche type of engagement. Feeling comfortable in scrapping this has been one of the most liberating and beneficial things in our change.

What would you say to other SUs who are thinking about a similar process?

I'd be encouraging them to go back to basics and think about the outcomes they want. Forget about what you have and about pinching or copying someone else's model. Think about what makes a difference for your students. Are your students making change right now? Are they doing it through you? We know students are doing so much stuff all the time, but they aren't coming through the Guild because we're seen as bureaucratic. Think about the starting point. The lessons from doing this together this year, working out the basics of the structures and foundations. We've ended up doing it anyway, pivoting halfway through the year. It really challenged how we engage with students and thinking about how we are *facilitating* that change, not necessarily *structuring* that change.

Read more about this exciting work here:

https://www.exeterguild.org/news/article/6001/Real-Change-Democracy-Review/

https://www.exeterguild.org/asset/Event/27236/GUILD-COUNCIL-2022.05.25-PAPER-Real-Change.pdf