

Call for Tender: External Agent for Students' Union Democracy Review

Summary

We are interested in hearing from an appropriately experienced external consultant or agent to lead on a Democracy Review here at University of Suffolk Students' Union. The aim of this is to introduce an engaging method of Union democracy which allows the possibility of our wide-ranging students to engage with the representative arm of the Students' Union. This would involve a review of our Student Officer roles, Democratic and accountability structures (including Council, Student Officer Committee and AGM/AMM's), as well as part of our constitutional documentation. As part of this, consideration would need to be given to not only our students who are locally based, but also our students across partnerships across the country and world.

Whilst we are open to new ideas, we have an expectation for the agents/consultants to be guided by evidence. The agent/consultant would need to have understanding of not only our legal responsibilities and duties in relation to our democratic processes, but also a level of operational understanding of a functioning Students' Union.

The project will commence in October 2025, with a draft report expected by March 2026. Proposals are welcome from all interested parties.

Please send proposals to Lindsay Westgarth at L.Westgarth@uos.ac.uk by 4pm Friday 10th October 2025.

Current context of University of Suffolk Students' Union

University of Suffolk Students' Union is a young Students' Union being created as it currently is, in 2016.

Since 2016 the Students' Union has come through one full strategic cycle, and we're about to embark on a new strategy development process. The organisation has a fairly new staff team with 80% of these having joined within the last 18 months. This has led to conversations and ideas for opportunity, but also a space to safely question how and why we run our services in the way we do and how we as an organisation want to develop strategically and operationally. A big piece of this revolves around our engagement work, with a particular focus on the Democracy aspects of our organisation.

Here at Suffolk, we have two Full Time Officers (President of Education, and President of Activities and Wellbeing currently), and a portfolio of 13 Part Time Officers, with elections for all held in the Spring period. We also hold a Student Council up to six times a year, a monthly Student Officer Committee and an Annual General Meeting. We have some evidence to show that some of the officer roles may not be as aligned to student interest as we would like, and again we have some evidence to show that there is little interest in the more traditional democratic structure that we have in place at Suffolk.

Aside to this, we also have student leader opportunities such as committee leadership roles for each Sports and Society as well as a Course Rep system delivered in collaboration with the University, with the aim of having representation relating to their experiences across the University.

Our structures are very reminiscent of Students' Unions in years gone by, and can see there has been inspiration taken from others in the sector in order to develop the structure into what it currently is. However, we're aware that not only has the sector moved on when it comes to these once traditional students, but also that there is a feeling that our student demographic wasn't considered when implementing this democratic structure here at Suffolk.

Some of the questions we have had about the processes have been:

- Why do we have a structure that is so traditional when our students aren't?
- How can we ensure that the roles we have represent those in our student body who are underrepresented? Is what we have suitable?
- What are the barriers to engagement that we have?

- How do members hold their representatives to account if no involvement in structures?
- How do we ensure that the policy being tabled is the policy that relates to our members? Does policy setting work?
- What methods of accountability would be appropriate for our members – and how can they influence the work of the officers via this?

Some information relating to the University of Suffolk and its students.

We are seen by the University as a key partner in their vision for the future; to grow and transform students, the community and the wider region. The University is also in a period of change and review, and in 2026 will celebrate its 10th anniversary.

Students at Suffolk can be generally split into two groups – those based on the Ipswich campus (minority) and those who are enrolled at the partner institutions (the majority).

The University has recently moved to a two School structure with a main base in Ipswich; the School of Health, Services and Society, and the School of Business, Arts, Social Sciences and Technology. Additionally, a large percentage of University of Suffolk students are based elsewhere in the UK in the likes of London, Birmingham, Manchester, Norfolk as well as Internationally in areas in Singapore, Mauritius and Kazakhstan.

Historically, students at University of Suffolk tend to be mature, local to Ipswich or commuting from another location and health based. This is starting to shift a little more, but the student body is not a “traditional” 18-21 year old age range. The University has also seen an increase in International students applying to study at the University of Suffolk itself as opposed to a partner.

Project Scope and Deliverables

The aim of this review is to consider:

1. To review the Student Officer Committee as a whole. Are the roles the appropriate roles to allow them to act as true student representatives of our student body?
2. Do the structures we have in place allow for Cross-Student Effectiveness, allowing our members from across the student body to get involved with as few barriers as possible?

3. In terms of our student leaders, are we the barrier to engagement due to the layers or are we delivering democracy in a way that they feel is not relevant to them?
4. What is it that our students specifically at University of Suffolk want to see in terms of getting involved with the SU voice?

We imagine that much of this work can be conducted remotely with an occasional visit to the Ipswich campus, and local partners if needed to gather student opinion.

In terms of deliverables for this project, we expect to receive the following:

- **Stakeholder engagement**
As this is a review into the democratic processes of our student voice into the Students' Union, we do expect there to be engagement with our students to support research, potential new ideas and evidence for outcomes from across our student membership. We would also like this to be collaborative, working with key members of our staff team to ensure consideration of operational and strategic work of the organisation prior to outcomes.
- **A full and thorough review:**
We expect a thorough review considering all aspects including but not limited to our representation structures and positions, meeting types and delivery, decision-making processes, accountability methods and other participation mechanisms. This may also involve a review of our current bye-laws to indicate where improvements may be needed.
- **Recommendations and suggested implementation plan:**
As mentioned above, we are open to new ideas but would also like to receive direction and recommendations on how to implement based on our resource. This is so that it not only aligns with the direction of the organisation but to also be sustainable as time goes on – inclusion of recommended short term, medium term and long term recommendations would be welcomed.

Key dates to consider:

Deadline for Proposals	4pm Friday 10 th October
Interviews for Involvement	Monday 20 th October 2025
All Members Meeting	Monday 1 st December 2025
End of Officer Elections	Friday 13 th February 2026
First Draft expected	Friday 20 th February 2026
Final Report with Recommendations	Friday 6 th March 2026

There may also be invitation to present to Trustee Board towards the end of the academic year.

We would like to start this work as soon as possible with a suggested timeframe of towards end of October 2025, however, we may be able to be flexible depending on the approach or proposal provided. Our end goal is to have a review finalised with chance to take to Student Council before the end of academic year 25/26 and so the completion date of the review is currently set for 6th March 2026.

Proposals will be reviewed and assessed for value for money as disclosed in application when submitted.

Application

In your application we would like to see:

- A proposal that includes steps that you would take to deliver the project, including:
 - o Timeline with key stages/milestones
 - o Plan for student engagement during process
- Thoughts on the scope of the project and the aims that have been shared
- A summary about you or your organisation, and previous relevant experience including qualifications or examples of similar project work with other democratic organisations
- A breakdown of costs for delivery

We welcome applications not only from those who have worked with Students' Unions in the past, but also those who have worked to review democratic organisations outside of the Higher Education sector.

Any questions please contact Lindsay Westgarth, Head of Engagement, at L.Westgarth@uos.ac.uk

Submission and Interviews

Submission should be received by 4pm on Friday 10th October 2025, and we may hold follow up interviews in w/c 20th October 2025. Communication will be sent to relevant parties in relation to this at the time.

Please direct all submission to Lindsay Westgarth, Head of Engagement, at L.Westgarth@uos.ac.uk