

Representation in GSU Officer Elections

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**greenwich
students'
union**

Introduction

In July 2023, the Trustee Board of GSU rejected a recommendation from Student Assembly to implement quotas for GSU Officer positions, instead commissioning the Democracy and Insights Team to undertake a research project, asking:

As part of the wider picture of encouraging the greater participation of under-represented groups, GSU should establish a research project to look at initiatives that will increase representation from underrepresented groups (including quotas), this would include the impact of these initiatives as seen at other Students' Unions and democratic, membership-led organisations with a full report coming to Trustee Board for review in the academic year 2023/24.

The authors identified the following research questions to specify areas and scope of enquiry:

1. Is there a long-term issue for the representation of groups of students with protected characteristics in GSU elections?
2. What would increase representation for under-represented groups in elections?
3. How effective are gender quotas in improving representation for women students?
- 4.

As part of the fulfilment of this project, GSU staff have taken a variety of approaches to ascertain the reasons for under-representation of certain groups in GSU Officer Elections, with a focus on women as the basis for the rejected motion. These are detailed in the methodology section, but broadly included an analysis of demographic trends in both candidates and voting patterns across the last three sets of elections, qualitative research with past candidates and current GSU representatives, and research on initiatives and trends across the sector.

One of the more striking findings of the research is that, whilst representation for women is on a downwards trend across the sector, GSU appears to be one of the first students' unions to experience such a stark set of election results, with the research project therefore one of the first to explore tackling a phenomenon that may be a more frequent occurrence in future years. Under-representation, particularly with regards to women in SU elections, is not new in its entirety, and we have been able to draw on a pool of research from the past decade to inform our recommendations. The proposals provided recognise that the issues raised are multi-faceted, and there is not a single initiative that will 'fix' the problem of representation for students with marginalised identities across our campuses. However, the implementation and careful monitoring of the detailed recommendations would represent a proactive step in GSU achieving representation that reflects the diversity of the Greenwich community in its highest offices.

Methodology

This research utilises a mixed methods approach to provide analysis and recommendations, including:

1. Quantitative analysis of election voter, candidate and winner data over time.
2. Qualitative data gathered through three focus groups of GSU members to identify specific local representation issues.
3. Qualitative evidence gathered from other students' unions, bodies working with students' unions, and studies drawn from non-higher education contexts.

The quantitative analysis of GSU elections trends utilises data going back to the GSU Leadership Elections in 2021. The reason for this is that, as demonstrated in our analysis of wider SU election trends, 2021 represented a historic high point in winning women Officer candidates. The research team has reasonable belief that any pertinent local issues are identifiable in the post-2021 period, which is corroborated by a national fall from the historic high.

Three focus groups were conducted for the purposes of point 2. One group consisted of female candidates of the last election, the second one consisted of both male and female academic/society representatives, and the third one consisted of female academic/society representatives. The data was then paraphrased, transcribed, and several emergent themes were noted. Participants were identified through a call for volunteers put out to election candidates from the 2023 elections, society leaders and academic representatives, and the eventual participants were randomly selected from this group. A total of nine students participated in the three focus groups.

The research team was conscious that the volunteers for focus groups are students who are already engaged with GSU. This does mean that the voices of those who are little engaged in GSU in the first instance are not represented within this project. However, this decision was taken on the basis that wider questions of under-representation in GSU activities involves a number of staff teams which requires a broader exploration, and this was therefore considered beyond the immediate and useful scope of this project.

Findings

In the past three student Union elections at the University of Greenwich, there have been some interesting voting and participation trends leading to the issue of inclusivity that the Democracy and Insights team have been asked to investigate.

Year	Male voters	Male Candidates	Male winning candidates	Female voters	Female winning Candidates	Female candidates
2021	50.26%	47%	25%	49.68%	53%	75%
2022	57.18%	52%	75%	42.69%	43%	25%

2023	52.35%	73%	100%	47.01%	27%	0%
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Figure 1: Voter, candidate and winner data by election by gender since 2021.

The number of women candidates has faced a consistent decline in Officer elections since 2021, and this correlates clearly with the steep drop in the number of winning candidates, going from 75% women to 0% over the three elections. Gender demographics across GSU’s membership do not provide an immediate explanation for this; as of January 2024, only 43.42% of GSU’s members identify as men. It is also not the case that significantly more men are voting, as the number of women voters only represents a 3% decrease on the 2021 elections. The decline in female candidates is far more convincing as the key factor in the rapid drop in women winning the elections.

2021 represented a high watermark for the representation of women in SU elections nationally, with WonkHE reporting on this at the time and a number of SUs suggesting any combination of students seeking empathetic leaders in the aftermath of the pandemic, the increased prominence of policy aspects of the SU over that period and more accessible online campaigning led to this outcome. There has, however, also been a nationally noted decrease in women candidates since that high watermark.

You can see the straightforward trend in the reduction of both women Officers and candidates below:

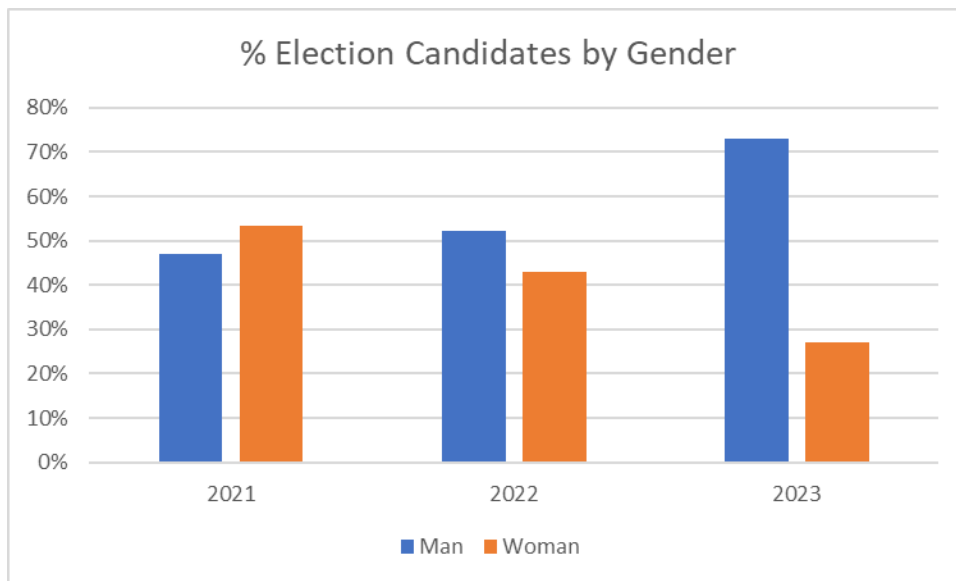


Figure 2: Election candidates by gender since 2021.



Figure 3: Percentage of male candidates compared to percentage of successful male candidates since 2021

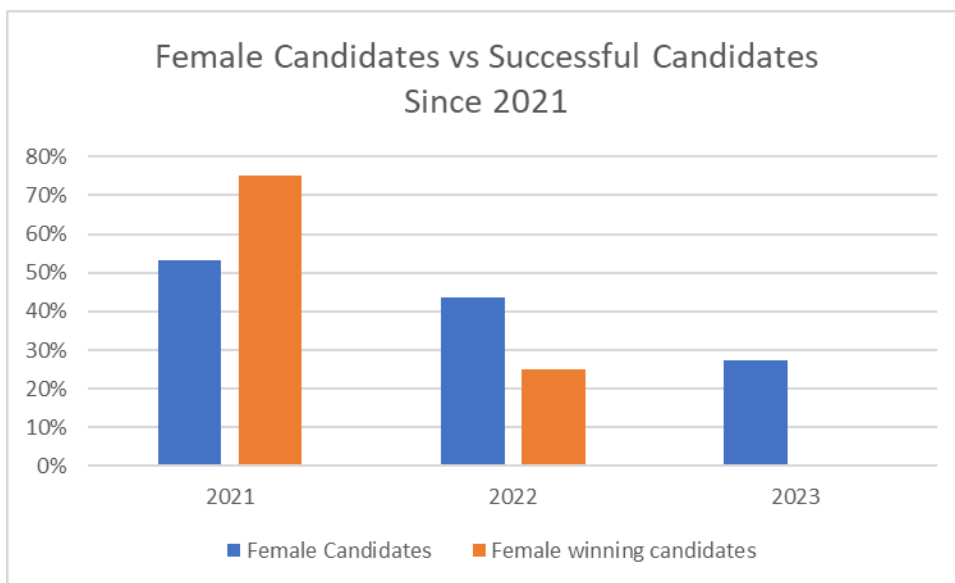


Figure 3: Percentage of female candidates compared to percentage of successful female candidates since 2021

The picture for representation is not entirely negative across all groups, however. There has been a clear increase in participation for non-white students since 2021 both in terms of candidate number, voting and winning candidates, as shown below:

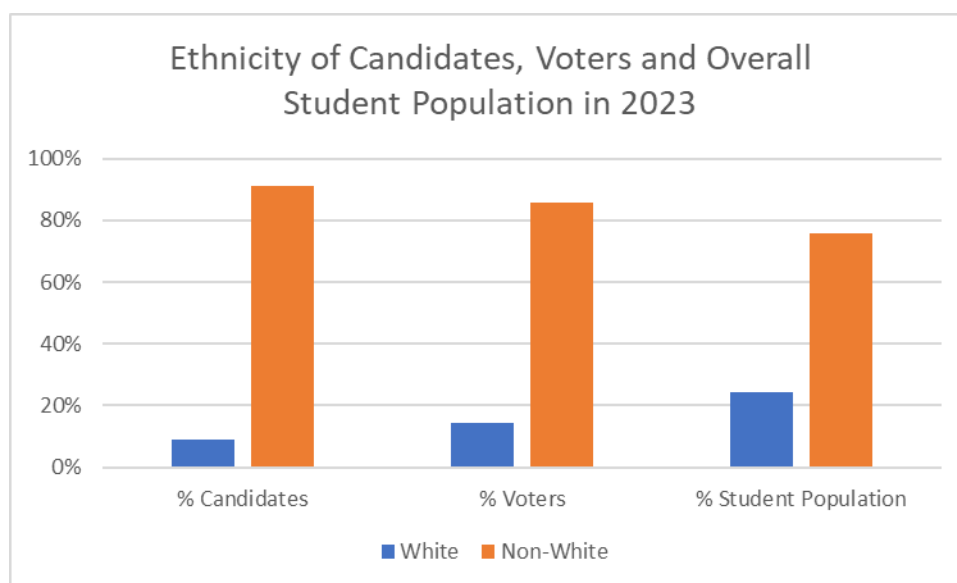


Figure 2: Ethnicity divided to white and non-white for 2023 elections, compared to student population as of Jan 2024.

The enhanced representation of non-white candidates (successful and unsuccessful), most prominently from Asian/British-Asian backgrounds, is perhaps unsurprising given the increasing number of students of this ethnicity winning Officer positions since 2020, the myriad of issues posed for international students and the increased spotlight on these through GSU initiatives such as Global Greenwich and Officer campaigns. This should be viewed as a success of GSU engagement with students of colour and international students, as well as a reflection of issues facing an expanding section of the student community.

Having ascertained there is a specific under-representation of women in both self-nominated candidates and in winning candidates, the research team conducted three focus groups to explore these themes with the following composition:

1. Female candidates in the 2023 GSU Leadership Elections.
2. A mixed-gender group of society leaders and academic representatives.
3. A group of female society leaders and academic representatives.

From a thematic analysis of the groups, the following themes have been identified:

Perceptions of GSU Officer Representation

Participants largely promoted the notion that GSU was not entirely inclusive of certain identities within its Officer elections. Participants felt that the GSU could do better:

"The student union should aim to be more inclusive in all aspects. Gender, ethnicity and indeed ability".

"Not all ethnic groups are equally represented in the GSU".

"I think in terms of gender representation in the elections, the GSU can do better".

Lack of electoral awareness and incentive

There was a consensus across the groups that unless a student was close to the election process or to the student union, they would miss the announcements for elections and by extension the chance to participate in the electoral process either as voters or as contestants, a notion which was shown by the following quotations:

“The publicity around the elections is insufficient and there is no proper introduction to the electoral processes in the university.”

“In my opinion, when there’s an election going on, every part of the university ought to know, and every single student should be aware”.

“There should be a page on the official website dedicated to promoting the elections”.

It is worth noting that GSU elections do have a dedicated website, but the final quote is included to demonstrate a lack of awareness of its existence.

Disregard for female candidates

According to the female candidates, the process of campaigning was demoralising because of the lack of regard for them as people who identified as women.

“They [male students] did not take me seriously. They did not regard me seriously as a person who was running for an election, someone with the power to lead and make changes”.

“The general behaviour of male students is dismissive and rude towards women”.

One female candidate from the 2023 Leadership Elections mentioned being harassed continuously by a male student across the elections period, with the man continuously asking her on dates. This experience highlights one of the distinct challenges that women candidates face when campaigning.

Dissatisfaction with Elections Process

Many of the focus group participants, especially the past female contestants, spoke about the electoral process being tedious, with lots of forms that contestants must fill out as well as it being a mostly online process.

“As I see it, the elections are too digitalised. Every elected position should have a requirement of the contestants making their cases in public, in person”.

“The election process is unnecessarily long with too many forms to fill”.

There were also concerns with the laxity of rules around manifestos for the contestants and the implications of that for choosing the most qualified candidate regardless of gender.

“The campaign process of repeatedly talking to people about your election plans is rather humiliating. I think it makes the elections a popularity contest rather than a showcase of appropriate skills and experience for the role of GSU officer”.

“I thought I would be subject to an interview and required to present a detailed and convincing manifesto during the election process, but that was not the case”.

Gender Quotas

There was also a theme of differing ideas on quota implementation. The answer to the question “What is your opinion on the implementation of gender quotas in the GSU elections?” produced varied answers in the focus groups. Some participants felt that it was a good way to improve representation.

“I do not feel represented by the current GSU officers. I think they are working hard in the interest of the students, but I think that quotas will increase the representation”.

“There should always be at least one woman there among the sabbatical officers for the students who are not comfortable to approach men”.

“It is a good idea to have two male and two female sabbatical officers as that would show gender equality”.

Some other participants felt that it would be unfair. These tended to be the participants who presented as male, but some female participants also felt the same way.

“Implementing gender quotas would mean that half the seats were not fairly won, and that could diminish the respect that people have for the candidates”.

“If there were two candidates who actually won and then two ushered in via quotas, I think the ones who won would make better leaders than the other ones, who might turn out to be ineffective leaders”.

Still others felt that the quotas could be implemented but only under certain circumstances.

“Quotas can be implemented on the basis that two women with the highest votes should be put in government via the quota system so that there will be the guarantee of having people with passion and leadership skills on the seats”.

And some had doubts that the quota system could work at all.

“If there is to be any change whatsoever in the inclusion problems that we have in the GSU, the perception of women in authority has to change completely, and I doubt that quotas can achieve that”.

Motivation to run in Officer elections

When asked about what would motivate them to run in the elections, the male and female participants differed in their responses. The male participants mostly felt confident to run based on personal skills and motives.

“I do not need much incentive to contest in the elections. I have a lot of passion to make changes in the system and I want to be a recognised voice to that effect”.

The female participants, however, answered based on representation and experience.

“I want to represent. I would like to bring my department, which is majorly female, to the forefront, because I want different voices to be heard”.

“I have experience sharing my views and making changes already as a student representative for my program. I would like to continue helping other student voices to be heard”.

Lastly, when asked about what other methods they would take to improve the inclusivity in the student elections, the participants had different ideas such as:

“The GSU should utilise the student representatives to achieve equality as they’re the ones closest to the grassroots, they know everybody, and they can easily reach out to the under-represented groups”.

“The election contestants should reach out to specific under-represented groups in their campaign”.

Discussion

The findings from the study reflect the issues written about in previous research, as well as opinions from leaders across the sector. The issues noted from the research as the barriers to inclusive representation in students' union elections include: Insufficient publicity of the GSU elections, a lack of incentives for minorities, especially women, to run against the majority or to challenge the status quo, a general disregard for female election candidates among the student body, a laxity of rules around manifestoes which are seen as a tool for electing officers based on values and proposed policies, and a tedious election process that tends to favour more confident people, which research has shown tends to be people who identify as male (Brooks, Byford and Sela, 2015). There were also different ideas based on the implementation of quotas as a solution to the inclusion problem, where some participants felt that the quotas could help solve the problem of inclusivity, some felt that the quotas could only work with conditions attached, and others felt that quotas were not the answer at all.

Recommendations

Based on these findings therefore, we have compiled a list of suggestions which we think can be implemented as both short- and long-term solutions and answers our research question based on the commission from the GSU trustee board.

In-Election Solutions

1. **Implement initiatives that give candidates an opportunity to draw attention to their policy platforms.** These could include:
 - a. Hustings or Q&A formats for candidates.
 - b. Physical and digital advertising of manifestos, which could include the return of manifesto booklets.
2. **Implement 'Elections Welfare Officers' -**

GSU staff who across the elections period can act as a point of contact for candidates if they need advice or experience any unacceptable behaviour for voters. This is especially important for minority groups, including women who are contesting in the elections. According to the NUS 'Man in the Mirror' report written in 2014, the presence of women in or around official positions is one of the biggest motivations for others to participate and even vote in elections. This was mirrored by one of the participants in the focus group who said:

"I feel like many of the women who work in the GSU to support students are neither publicised nor recognised. It would have helped me so much during my campaign if they were".

3. **Tighten restrictions on GSU voting stalls to reduce scope for voter intimidation or interference from candidates.** *This was a recommendation from last years' elections, whereby voting will be done separately from the 'elections stall', so that individuals are able to vote in privacy.*
4. **Implement physical and digital signage reiterating that candidates need to be treated with respect during the elections.**

Structural Solutions

3. **Implement gender quotas - with at least one place reserved for someone who does not self-identify as male.**

The topic of the effectiveness of gender quotas in the literature is a very contested one. Many organisations and countries have implemented gender quotas as means of ensuring that women get elected into office, however, what has been found is that the effectiveness – both short and long term depends on the type of quota used and the institutional/cultural narrative surrounding women. (Su and Chen, 2023). Therefore, while reserved seats ensure a fixed percentage for women and other minority representation, the concept and face of leadership in the student union should be examined. An example of this is seen at the University of Bedfordshire where there were four all male groups of sabbatical officers elected within five years, which prompted the need for diversity. According to the Deputy CEO of membership services at the University of Bedfordshire Student Union Amy McLaughlan, Quotas were implemented, and the process included getting rid of the term president as it was discovered that it connotes male leadership despite being a non-gendered term and replacing it with co-president, of which it was compulsory for the co-presidents to be of different genders and also the co- vice presidents, which has improved the gender representation among the sabbatical officers.

Another example is in Rwanda, which after setting a quota of 30% women parliament members in 2003, had 64% of its parliament as women in 2013 ten years after, compared to the global average of 23.8%. However, in the year 2018, a report found that the treatment of women both within the parliament and without remains unchanged. Women are still subjugated and overlooked because the representation was not backed by efforts to counter the negative attitudes towards women in power.

There was some controversy amongst focus group participants about quotas additionally, with some strongly recommending them to GSU and pushing back against them. The reason this appears as a recommendation, therefore, is because:

- a. It is the only recommendation we can make that will guarantee an improvement to women's representation in the GSU Officer team.
- b. There is a subsequent risk that, if there continues to be a significant over-representation of men on an annual basis over a long period, this could further dissuade women from winning the election. This could not only worsen the issue, but also reduce long-term trust in the union from a group that represents over half of the University population.

We recommend that any decision on this is delayed until after the 2024 GSU Officer Elections, to establish whether the trend towards more male Officer teams was a temporary one, or a longer-term trend that requires a structural rebalance.

0. Compulsory manifestos in elections, to ensure that substantive policy is an essential requirement of elections.

Manifestos are very important documents which signify the seriousness of election processes and reveal candidates' policy intentions. However, it is important that manifestos use inclusive language and are written for general understanding to be effective (Eder, Jenny and Muller, 2017).

Representative Pathways

1. Make Officer elections as visible as possible for members in the months running up to nominations closing.

Focus group participants noted that there is not enough awareness of Officer elections across the board, and additionally the 2023 elections were highly unbalanced in terms of candidate gender demographics. Running more 'Thinking of Running' nomination stalls utilising GSU career staff in a variety of student spaces is a way of guaranteeing that members are aware of, and have as much opportunity as possible to directly talk to someone who can encourage them to run.

2. Ask Engagement and Opportunities and Student Voice and Representation Teams to collect and analyse data about the demographics of their representatives and consider positive actions to improve representation where necessary.

This is one of the easiest ways of tracking the students who are highly engaged with GSU structures and are easiest to reach in terms of direct GSU communication channels. Understanding whether there is poor representation for certain groups, including women, in lay representative positions, will likely improve candidate representation for under-represented and marginalised groups of students.

3. Run targeted workshops for under-represented groups of representatives and student leaders in the build-up to elections.

Universities are very powerful and are instrumental in the promotion of gender equality, diversity, and inclusion, and this is not just in the context of higher education, but in general society (Rosa, Drew and Canavan,2020). As stated in the introduction, GSU is one of the first student unions to investigate into inclusivity and therefore it is hoped that the University of Greenwich will implement some of these recommendations in order to become a pipeline of equality, diversity and inclusion into today's society in the UK and the world at large.

Conclusions

The findings and analysis presented above demonstrate that there is a concerning pattern in Officer elections that has the

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