

BUHABS is the last remaining student-led hot air ballooning society in the UK (and, despite what the SU seems to imply about associate membership, we ARE student led). If you've seen the UoB hot air balloon anywhere, that's us.

In the 25/26 academic year we are due to celebrate our 40th anniversary. If these changes to associate membership go through, we are very unlikely to celebrate a 41st.

Our original founder is still a member. He conducts our mandatory inspections for free every year. A former member who was our President 20 years ago still helps train our new pilots. Other instructors in the wider ballooning community give up their time for free despite not having been BUHABS members themselves or even having attended UoB. We have a current member of staff who gives up his time to drive for us regularly and asks nothing in return.

Our society is run BY students FOR students. We have 47 members and only 6 are associate. But our associate members are essential. Our insurance requires our drivers to have held a UK or EU driver's license for at least 3 years. Very few undergraduates are able to meet this criterion, simply because of their age. The SU promised that they were "feeding in" this information to the external review. Well, it certainly doesn't seem to have affected the outcome.

It takes quite a while to train to be a balloon pilot. Not only do you have to complete a large number of flying hours with an instructor, but you must also be certified to have flown under various weather conditions, undertaken various types of landing, have completed a tether, successfully completed a solo "check out" flight, and passed a number of exams.

Even if a student is able to tick all of these boxes while currently studying, they will probably have graduated within a year or so afterwards. But, in order to keep our society going and offer flights to members, we need our pilots to continue flying for us for as long as possible afterwards.

This is the social contract on which our society is based: pilots are able to train for only the cost of their exams, personal equipment, and the standard flight fee charged to all our members when they fly. Nowhere else could they learn so cheaply. In return, they fly the rest of us as frequently as possible for as long as possible.

These changes to the SU rules will mean that, not only can our pilots, drivers, and instructors no longer be members of our society, but they will be banned from attending our events.

In the case of pilots and instructors, they might be able to get permission to continue under the SU's ill-conceived "coaching and teaching" scheme. But they will no longer be able to take part in activities BEYOND their specific remit. How is that any way to treat people who volunteer their time for us? "Thank you for flying us, now go away while the rest of us go down the pub?"

For the many instructors who have no connection to UoB beyond BUHABS and just want to help out young balloonists, this new system is an intolerable imposition on people who are giving their time for free. They may just decide it's not worth it anymore, and we certainly wouldn't blame them for that.

As for our drivers, they won't be able to continue AT ALL. They don't have a "professional qualification" and they're not members of a "professional association". They're just ordinary people (mostly UoB alumni and staff) who give up their time to help. And those of us on the committee who HAVE held a license long enough to drive the BUHABS van can attest that handling a van and trailer along narrow country roads and across fields is not easy.

If these changes are implemented, we will need to start paying people to do the things that are currently done for free. A recent advertisement placed by a member of the local ballooning community is offering £300 a day for pilots and £100 for crew (i.e. drivers). At that rate, BUHABS would be bankrupt after 2 flights.

Perhaps the SU do have good reasons for this decision. We will never know because they have refused to release the report. We are told that our views were considered during the view. The resulting policy shows no evidence of that. We're supposed to take their decision on trust. Well, trust is earned and they've worked extremely hard in the last few weeks to destroy what little trust they may have accrued.

The SU needs to pause, take a breath, and join the adults in the room in open and honest discussion.

To the board of trustees: **Speak to us, and speak to us soon. Speak to us honestly and openly. Or your relationship with the student body will break down completely and irreparably.**