

UoM's radical referendum on Rothwellian rule could revolutionise the student's role from customer to partner.

Manchester is home to some of the most radical and far-reaching movements we've ever witnessed, from the Industrial Revolution to Communism to Feminism – the city has been at the centre of change, but could it be on the verge of rearing yet another revolutionary shift? This month's referendum - established by and offered to UoM's students - is a chance to turn this possibility into a reality, transforming a crowd of disgruntled voices into a single call that cannot and will not be ignored.

Rothwell's reality check

Following [Fence Gate](#), a group of Halls residents decided to go a step further than simply tearing down physical barricades, instead - turning their focus on those who'd catalysed the [all too understandable reaction](#) - they set about dismantling the University's power and authority.

Democratically, they decided to put up [a petition](#), aiming to trigger a 'no confidence vote' in Nancy Rothwell (Vice-Chancellor of UoM) and her managerial team, successfully [acquiring the 400 signatures they needed](#) in only 24hrs of it going live.

[The referendum](#), set to be held on 8th March, will be the first of its kind in the University's near 200-year history, highlighting just how radical the motion to remove Rothwell actually is. But despite the evident determination of this group, larger questions loom over the whole of the student body – some of which came to the fore in a recent interview Rothwell had with [Fuse FM](#).

During [the conversation](#), the Chancellor repeatedly invoked a nostalgia for normality and a desire to return to the idyllic connection between student, union, and university; to a time when each member of the larger body fulfilled their responsibilities to each other and considered themselves partners in a united community.

Which leads us on to our first question: Has this utopia, which Rothwell claims to be normality, ever existed?

A new normal

I ask this because the normality I remember was cut from a very different cloth, one which resembles the fabric of our reality today far more than it does the reimagining's of Rothwell, woven by her nostalgic appeal to a pre-pandemic paradise.

This is a crucial point, because the issues arising from the pandemic aren't just a disruption of normal life - as Rothwell and many others in positions of authority seem to suggest. Instead, in many ways, they're solely a symptom of it. Understandably, there have been exacerbations of certain issues,

which have then brought these contentions into the often-harsh cold light of day, but only the superficial has changed – the problem remains, only casting a longer and, perhaps, darker shadow.

Ironically, in this way the pandemic offers us the unique means and motivation to reflect on what we value most, whilst simultaneously providing us with the opportunity to change our reality if it does not match our expectations.

The question which then follows is this: If this utopia has never existed – could it? And, most importantly, what are we going to do to answer this question?

Revolution or Reformation?

Across the country this year, students have had to battle with their universities over the extortionate costs of a product which has failed to deliver on its promises. And no matter how much Rothwell or any other Chancellor wants to dress it up, students are currently first and foremost customers - not partners – and are all too often exploited as such.

But this nationwide tenant action ([the largest for 40 years](#)), along with calls for reimbursement of some tuition fees is an opportunity for us to change our role as students. It has shown the universities, and crucially the student body, that we're capable of much more than we're often given credit for.

Similarly, in Manchester the referendum can offer a point for renegotiation between universities and the student body, a way to make Rothwell's rhetoric and reimaginings a reality. It is an opportunity for us to become the partners we are told we are and to reform, or even revolutionise, our role as students without and within universities. This applies not only to UoM students (although a burden to offer inspiration to their counterparts exists) but to the nation's student body as a whole.

No matter the result of the referendum, the fact it's happening highlights the growing dissatisfaction of students with our position and the treatment we receive from our universities. It is now up to us to decide how we use these sentiments. Will we redefine our role for the better, and not just for ourselves but the community in its entirety, or will we again sit idly while another opportunity for change passes us by?