



The Political Institute
of Action Research

Artistic Initiatives

Shaping St Andrews' Cultural Identity: Policy Recommendations on Student Arts Initiatives

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This paper discusses the impact of student-led artistic initiatives on the cultural identity of St Andrews. Through qualitative methods, the research analyses the role of arts societies in fostering inclusion, community, and representation within an institution traditionally seen as culturally homogenous. Supplementarily, this report offers broad policy recommendations for key stakeholders within the University of St Andrews, such as members of the student-led arts initiatives (societies), the Students' Association, and University administrators.

Key Findings:

- Support structures remain uneven. While university-affiliated societies benefit from financial and logistical support from either the Student Union or the Athletic Union, there is a lack of legal guidance. This is also the case for non-university-affiliated groups, which also suffer from a lack of access to resources such as rehearsal venues.
- The lack of diversity and representation of cultures and differing artistic interests is a key issue. The surveys highlight the perception of the cultural identity at St Andrews as 'elite and Eurocentric'. This exclusivity is perpetuated by a lack of cultural representation and financial accessibility.
- An increase in logistical and legal support by the University would increase the accessibility of these initiatives by allowing them to properly represent the multitude of cultures, thus creating a more inclusive cultural identity.

Recommendations:

- The establishment of a Student Arts & Initiatives Office to provide guidance on legal, financial, and logistical issues for all societies, regardless of affiliation.
- The implementation of a subsidised venue access programme for unaffiliated groups, in return for community-inclusive events.
- The creation of a Digital Arts Platform to support peer mentorship and cross-society collaboration.
- The development of ticket subsidy schemes and increased marketing for underrepresented art forms to challenge the elitist reputation of major events.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is not fixed, but an ongoing process of communication, interaction, and positioning (Hall, 2015). This positioning is situated in a historical and cultural context that offers shared understandings of experience. While cultural identity can be defined as a collective of shared culture, norms and histories, it is also greatly recognised as the site of difference. Hall describes cultural identity as ‘a matter of “becoming” as well as of “being”’ which recognises cultural identity as a community encompassing diverse backgrounds and experiences within its own shared space (2015). Furthermore, cultural identity also offers a sense of belonging to an imagined community (Anderson, 2020). These shared imagined communities are fostered and upheld through shared stories, practices and beliefs.

Globalisation and international mobility have increased multicultural contexts, resulting in greater cultural diversity within communities, which is reflected within institutions such as the University of St Andrews. With such diversity, it is important to recognise that navigating different cultures is an advantage for today’s society (Campbell, 2000). The importance of community in the development of cultural identity is significant, with a general agreement that the development of individual cultural identity is a process of acceptance of the diverse cultural norms, beliefs and values within shared imagined communities (Campbell, 2000). Art plays a role in shaping cultural identity through its implementation of cultural heritage, values and beliefs. Creative practices work as tools to express collective memory and experience with University arts societies providing space within institutions where multiple identities meet, blend, and exchange cultural heritage.

This paper explores the role of student-led art initiatives at the University of St Andrews in shaping and fostering shared cultural identity. The paper investigates how arts societies contribute to the wider student community and investigates the perceptions and engagement of the student population. By understanding the experiences within and outside of student arts societies, this paper opens a dialogue of the successes and limitations of student-led art initiatives on nurturing St Andrews’ cultural identity. The intent of this paper is to enhance inclusivity, accessibility, and support for students and societies at the University of St Andrews. Through student experience, the paper offers policy recommendations that support students regardless of background to engage and benefit from the University’s creative and cultural opportunities. The policy recommendations are designed to proffer a more supportive and accessible framework for participation and collaboration within the St Andrews community.

2.0 Methodology

This research utilises an interpretivist approach to explore students' experiences at the University of St Andrews. This is incorporated within the qualitative methodologies used, where research findings are gathered through student opinion and community engagement. The research aims to understand how arts societies influence students' sense of cultural identity within St Andrews and the role these societies play within the broader University community. A student survey and five semi-structured interviews gather data regarding student experience and involvement in student-led arts societies and their impact on the construction of cultural identity.

2.1 Research Design and Data Collection

The research implements a Grounded Theory approach to a qualitative research design (Cutcliffe, 2000). This is an inductive approach that allows for findings to emerge naturally from data. The research begins by gathering data through methods of semi-structured interviews with members representing five arts societies and the distribution of an online survey amongst the student population. Through Grounded Theory, qualitative data was gathered and analysed, building findings through thematic coding of participant narratives and experience.

The initial research stage reviewed student arts societies at the University of St Andrews. It identified key societies which represented a variety of artistic disciplines, and used stratified sampling to select which societies within St Andrews to investigate further. Societies were categorised into subgroups of art genres: Visual, Performance, Media, and Fashion. Societies from each category were selected to be interviewed to allow for the exploration of multiple perspectives.

A survey was distributed to the wider student population to gather qualitative and quantitative data. The survey asked seven questions, both closed and open-ended, designed to capture students' level of involvement in arts societies and the perceived impact of these societies on St Andrew's cultural identity. The survey was distributed via an online Google Form survey, implementing convenience sampling and snowballing through social media, society mailing list and word of mouth (Etikan, Musa et al. 2016). Survey findings were analysed to identify thematic patterns across the student body. While quantitative data was gathered, this data was qualitatively utilised within the research findings.

The survey consisted of the following questions: The first question required respondents to rank the frequency of their engagement with arts societies, defined in the survey as 'theatre, dance, film, radio, music, visual arts, or similar societies', from the following options: 1) Very active; 2) Moderately active; 3) Not very active; or 4) Not active at all. The second question asked respondents to optionally list all of following categories of arts societies they had attended events of from the following options: 1) Performance: Dance, Acapella, Jazz Night, Music, *Mermaids*, Gilbert and Sullivan, Stand Up; 2) Media: The Saint, Radio, News, Magazines; 3) Fashion, Design, Sustainability; and 4) I am not active in arts initiatives. The third question required respondents to write an answer to the

question 'How do you view St. Andrews' cultural identity?'. The fourth question required respondents to answer the question 'Do you feel your personal identity has been shaped by your involvement in these societies?'. The fifth question optionally asked if respondents would like to elaborate on their answer to the previous question. The sixth question required respondents to answer the question 'Do you believe these societies have impacted the general cultural identity at St Andrews?'. The seventh question optionally asked if respondents would like to elaborate on their answer to the previous question. The eighth and final question optionally asked if respondents had any other thoughts they would like to contribute to the research.

In addition to the survey, in-person semi-structured interviews were conducted with members of selected societies. Participants were recruited through a 'site-based' procedure (Arcury and Quandt 1999). A site-based approach to recruiting participants identified 'sites' such as locations, organisations or services that hold members for recruiting. This research highlighted key student arts societies within St Andrews as the first stage. A list of arts societies was compiled, and a member of these initiatives was contacted for an interview. One participant was recruited from each selected site, with five semi-structured interviews conducted across the genre of art initiatives: Visual, Performance, Media and Fashion. The research conducted semi-structured interviews with members from the St Andrews Photography Society, People You Know Productions (a student playwright and performance society), The Saint newspaper, FS (a student-run fashion show), and the St Andrews Dance Club. These interviews facilitated discussions that allowed participants to share narratives relating to lived experience, art involvement and society impact on fostering a sense of cultural identity within St Andrews. The interviews focused on the following questions: 1) 'What does your society do, what is your role in it?'; 2) 'How does your society interact with the community?'; 3) 'How do you view St Andrews' cultural identity?'; 4) 'How did your society help you understand it?'; 5) 'How do you hope your society will contribute to the community? Are there any challenges you face when interacting/engaging with St Andrews? If so, what is it, and how can this be remedied? What support would you look for?'; 6) 'In what ways have you connected with the local town community through your society?'; and 7) 'What role does the Students' Association (Union) play in supporting or limiting your society?'.

2.2 Data Analysis

Implementing an inductive approach to data, the research analysed findings through the identification of themes, patterns and concepts (Nassaji, 2015). Data from the student survey was analysed using thematic coding, consistent with interpretivist methodology. The semi-structured interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded inductively, with key themes emerging through carefully examining participants' narratives. Themes were identified based on responses such as the role of art in personal expression, community building, and constructed cultural identity. The survey data was also coded thematically, with responses categorised into relevant themes based on students' reported

experiences and perceptions. To ensure credibility, coding from each semi-structured interview was peer-reviewed by the research group (Adeoye-Olatunde and Olenik 2021).

3.0 Findings

The recurring themes found throughout the interviews conducted with the five selected society leaders and student body survey revolved around the support provided to students and societies to pursue artistic initiatives, the accessibility of arts initiatives to the St Andrews community, and the impact of arts initiatives on the St Andrews community. Researchers considered the themes of support, accessibility, and community as existing in a self-reinforcing relationship. In this model, support for societies' arts initiatives and students' art interests are seen as improving the accessibility of the University's arts culture more broadly by increasing representation of students' diverse arts interests, talents, and backgrounds, which in turn strengthens the ability for arts initiatives to properly represent and impact the St Andrews community. Thus, our findings are structured into three sections: the support received or needed by societies leading arts initiatives and students with interests in arts initiatives; the accessibility of St Andrews arts initiatives; and the impact of student-led arts initiatives on the St Andrews community.

3.1 Support for Societies and Students

In many ways, some students' description of St Andrews' student art scene as 'vibrant' and 'active' within the survey is notable considering that the University lacks academic offerings in the fine arts, points highlighted by representatives for both the St Andrews Photography Society and *People You Know Productions*. Given an environment in which arts initiatives are largely student-led and independent of academics, the University's assistance for student-led arts initiatives were frequent topics of discussion in the student body survey and researchers' discussions with the five arts societies.

3.1.1 University Support for Societies

In researchers' interviews with society representatives, societies described a variety of relationships with the University and varying levels of support provided. Some societies claimed a close and interdependent relationship with the University. For example, the St Andrews Photography Society is affiliated with the St Andrews Student Union, a University organisation which coordinates student extracurriculars and representation, and has its darkroom located within the Students' Union building. One of the leaders of the Photography Society interviewed by researchers identifies the Students' Union as 'supportive,

responsive, and generous', noting that they provide for and maintain the darkroom free of charge to the society. Expanding on this, the Photography Society leader provided an anecdote detailing the great effort Union officials went through to help the Photography Society specially dispose of the hazardous chemicals used in the developing process.

Like the Photography Society, the St Andrews Dance Club has a similarly close relationship with the Athletic Union, an organisation that is functionally similar to the Student Union but involves athletics. Nevertheless, the organisation states some challenges in its relationship with the Athletic Union, describing that coordination is sometimes hampered because University staff are often busy. However, unlike many other sports teams which rely on the Director of Sports from the Athletic Union, the Dance Club has its own member of staff dedicated to the group. Additionally, the Dance Club described feeling vulnerable when entering into contracts with outside venues and that it feels it could benefit from increased legal support from the University.

Regarding funding, the Dance Club claims to be in a financially comfortable position, and that the University pays for their class space at the Sports Centre and bookings at the St Andrews Town Hall. Nevertheless, the Club must pay for its show venues and relies on volunteer teachers, a shortage of whom are preventing the Club's expansion into further dance genres.

In contrast to the Photography Society and Dance Club, the student-run playwright group *People You Know Productions* was explicitly founded as an arts initiative independent of the University. The organisation was created three years ago as an effort to produce a play rejected by the Students' Union-affiliated student play production society *Mermaids*, a mission which continues to the present itself in the society's goal of allowing students to produce plays independently from *Mermaids*. The representative from *People You Know* dictates how this independence allowed students to produce more 'experimental' productions and 'try things out', as *Mermaids* tended to 'put...on more classic stuff'. Although the representative from *People You Know Productions* describes the society's satisfaction with this arrangement and the 'flexibility' independence entails, the group's lack of support from the Students' Union has increased challenges in securing venue spaces. The representative illustrates how practices frequently occurred in society members' homes or in available spaces in the English department, though it has secured space at the Students' Union for performances part of the On the Rocks festival. At the same time, the lack of University support for securing venues has also allowed *People You Know Productions* to pivot towards hosting events within the town popular with students, such as a recent playwriting workshop hosted at Aikmans, a local bar, and posters placed in the cafe Taste, where one committee member works.

Like People You Know Productions, representatives from The Saint emphasise the paper's independence from the Student Union, which it has maintained since 1997. The representative claims this separation as 'important', as it allows for journalistic freedom that permits The Saint to publish articles without permission from the University. The Saint does reach out to the University's Communications Office for fact checks, but according to the representative of The Saint there is no 'censorship' involved in the process as they have never been prevented from publishing an article, a point the University emphasises in its correspondence with The Saint. By contrast, the representative from The Saint describes how peers from other universities working on student newspapers affiliated with their universities often must seek approval to publish articles. In this way, not being University-affiliated 'is such an important part' of The Saint's identity according to the interviewee as it strengthens the student journalism culture of St Andrews. This entails a commitment to publishing pieces grounded in fact even if it may be uncomfortable for some groups or individuals within the St Andrews community.

3.1.2 Societies' Support for Students

An important aspect of understanding support for student-led arts initiatives is also the assistance given by societies to fostering the student body's diverse arts interests. In the student body survey, some individuals noted how student arts initiatives have supported and strengthened their own arts interests, with one respondent describing how the Art Society's weekly live drawings have "helped immensely with my progress and keeping consistent on a hobby" while another described how Jazz Nights has led "thousands of people seriously into jazz who never would have listened to it otherwise". Nevertheless, many respondents stated how they felt that while the arts scene at St Andrews was active, there weren't societies or initiatives which supported their specific interests or backgrounds. For instance, one respondent noted missing African-American gospel singing during their time at St Andrews, a place where 'Anglican' church singing dominates. Furthermore, a trend among respondents is a perception that 'traditionalist' art forms, such as classical music and Shakespeare productions, dominate and are done at a high level within the St Andrews community. However, there is a concurrent lack of artistic diversity, especially in regards to 'contemporary' music and arts initiatives which cater to non-British or American audiences. One respondent interestingly notes that they miss arts events which stray from these dominating cultures as they are not often given the same 'visibility'.

Likewise, some respondents posited that societies often fail to build connections across the wider St Andrews community and support a broader swathe of students. For instance, one survey respondent felt that while engaging in singing arts initiatives, the respondent felt 'disconnected' from the broader arts scene. Similarly, another respondent described the broader arts scene as 'not inclusive' due to the dearth of 'collaborative cross-society networks'. Instead, this respondent claimed the arts scene to be vibrant but structured into 'isolated pockets'. Another respondent illustrated how this dynamic inhibited support for the wider student body as performances 'often just have friends of those in the show'. Expanding on this, another respondent said that some arts societies felt 'exclusive'. For many respondents, such exclusivity limits the ability for some student-led arts initiatives to represent, and therefore support, the St Andrews community. A term brought up by multiple respondents is that the St Andrews arts scene, while strong, often fails to 'represent' and thus include the variety of identities which make up the student body and wider town of St Andrews.

3.2 Accessibility

Interviews conducted with students in society leadership positions and student survey responses contained discussions on accessibility, with there being both praise and the calling for more proactive efforts, as well as reflection on the subsequent affiliations that arise due to accessibility levels.

Among the societies interviewed, the Photography Society, People You Know Productions, and the St Andrews Dance Club reflected on their initiatives and policies implemented that ensure accessibility is at the forefront of their societies. For example, the Photography Society prioritises making camera equipment available at no additional cost and hosting workshops on camera function and darkroom usage for an annual fee of £15, a sum far below the typical cost of developing film. These initiatives ensure that the club is accessible to members who would not otherwise have access to camera equipment and a darkroom lab, and the informational workshops help create a welcoming environment without expectations that members have already established themselves in photography.

As a society, *People You Know Productions* makes conscious decisions to perform plays written by new society members, offering St Andrews students the opportunity to participate in playwriting, while simultaneously providing a space for play production. Although the society was initially founded by a group of friends, *People You Know* has made an effort to produce a variety of students' work and also hosts a variety of wider events to engage with the student community, such as playwriting workshops, with the hope that more students can experiment with their writing skills and will want to become engaged with the society.

The St Andrews Dance Club exhibited large strides in their accessibility initiatives. While the higher-skilled dance groups' membership is determined by qualification, the Dance Club offers an array of level classes for various types of dance that require no prior experience. The society also stands as financially accessible to the students as the first club to offer bursening (and the only club that fundraises for the bursaries), and they also boast the lowest general membership for a sports club at £44 for the academic year. All dance instructors are Disabled Student Network-trained student volunteers, and every single instructor and class is equipped to modify the routines for any mental or physical barriers a dancer may have. The members of the society are diverse in background, experience, and culture, which translates into the multiplicity of the community's collaboration with an array of other societies, including Afrobeats, Saint LGBTQ to explore the queer aspects of dance, and others.

The Saint newspaper has taken strides to ensure that their publication continues to remain accessible to the student community of St Andrews. Not only is the publication free both in print form and digitally, but The Saint also distributes the newly published editions outside designated University spaces and to local townspeople in front of places such as the University library and the Student Union. To make the newspaper more accessible to those who may have visual impairment, The Saint also posts a biweekly podcast, and voices the most popular articles from the newspaper onto the podcast.

The St Andrews Fashion Show (FS) is intended to showcase the unique and multifaceted approach St Andrews students have towards fashion, while simultaneously raising money for charity. FS is accessible through their committee audition process by welcoming all students to apply regardless of degree or previous experience. However, one accessibility challenge that the society has faced has been the increase in ticket prices. As generally reflected in the student response survey, general ticket prices for events hosted by many societies is perceived as limiting the population of the student body which can or feel they want to attend. Consequently, events with high ticket prices can become associated with the preconceived notion that the event is intended for a small, elite percentage of St Andrews students. One of the factors found in interviews and research which contributes to high ticket prices is the pressure for many of the charity events to top the year before in the amount of money raised. While the aim for these functions is to contribute aid to organisations around Fife and greater Scotland, some do so at the expense of reducing the percentage of St Andrews students who can attend.

The general responses from the student survey reflected that while there are strong student-led arts initiatives at St Andrews, some societies' lack of accessibility and perceived exclusiveness precludes a large percentage of the

student body from engaging. Furthermore, some students reflected that they felt certain initiatives catered towards white people and failed to boost the initiatives of ethnic minorities at St Andrews. Such exclusivity—both cultural and financial— can make certain societies less accessible.

3.3 Community Impact of Student-Led Arts Initiatives

The interviews conducted with students in society leadership positions all emphasised the importance of connecting to the broader community of St Andrews. However, survey responses highlighted a divide in the perception of the University's cultural identity and its inclusiveness of the entire St Andrews community.

Some societies at St Andrews reach only a small community of like-minded students who share a common interest in a society's offerings. Such may be the case for the Photography Society and People You Know Productions. Other societies—FS, for example—tend to have a much wider outreach to the student community through organising major University events. Despite accessibility of events such as the FS fashion show or Starfields, a student music event hosted in the early weeks of Martinmas semester, the name and brand of societies like FS are known by a majority of the student body. FS as a society has a team of students who are passionate about fashion. However, the broader student community that engages with FS does so through ticketed events. Many societies, such as Photography or Dance, engage students through common interests and passions instead of hosting major University events every year.

The Photography Society attracts both novice and experienced photographers and works to ensure all feel welcome by making cameras easily accessible and providing a darkroom for just £15 per year. The society hosts biweekly 'photo walks', which are an opportunity to both connect with fellow photographers and to learn or improve photography skills. The representative from the Photography Society describes how the walks are a social experience as much as a photographic one, with members mingling as they adventure through town, stopping to photograph various sights. Since St Andrews lacks an academic fine arts programme, this society provides a space for students to hone their photography skills in ways they may not have been able to elsewhere. Though they have faced the challenge of attracting advanced photographers given that this society is centred around beginners, the Photography Society has made a strong effort this year to host events that attract and increase engagement of both beginner and talented student photographers.

People You Know Productions is a non-University affiliated play production society for students at St Andrews. As this society began three years ago to provide a platform for a play that was rejected by *Mermaids*, *People You Know Productions* allows students to experiment with playwriting, giving the broader St Andrews community—including parents and townspeople—a chance to

experience more 'experimental' productions. People You Know engages with local shops and businesses that are popular among students by, for example, hosting workshops and auditions in Aikman's Bar and posting advertisements at Taste, a popular coffee shop. In this way, students, parents, and town locals can interact with each other and engage in playwriting, cultivating and strengthening a sense of community at St Andrews.

The Dance Club is an athletic union-affiliated club that coaches dance lessons for all levels. The Dance Club interacts with the St Andrews community through charity work and community outreach. They have partnered with SupportED Scotland to raise money for eating disorder awareness and recovery. They also host canned food collection drives during bring-a-friend sessions, which both benefit the greater Fife area and broaden the students' community. The Dance Club has also begun Junior Saints, which are dance lessons for children in St Andrews, which connects students to town locals and provides an opportunity for children to explore their passions. The Dance Club partners with other student groups to host workshops on different styles of dancing, such as breakdancing. As mentioned earlier, they are the most financially accessible sport on campus with disability-friendly policies, allowing more of the St Andrews community to interact and engage with this art form. The Dance Club highlights and honors diversity in St Andrews, since its members bring a myriad of international and cultural perspectives to the club. Additionally, the Dance Club presents a showcase at the Byre Theatre with tickets that are open to the public.

FS hosts an annual fashion show that showcases local, student, and international brands. By using student models and placing students in charge of the creative visions and choreography, FS fosters an environment where diverse ideas come together to create a fashion show that emulates different aspects of the cultural identity at St Andrews. Through major events such as Starfields and the FS fashion show, FS aspires to promote confidence in one's skin and encourages students to engage with a myriad of fashion trends in the town. FS's most recent theme for their fashion show "Second Skin" promoted the idea that our clothes are our second skin: clothing represents our individuality. FS cultivates community in individuality in their society and in the greater St Andrews community.

The Saint is the University and the town's newspaper. They are not affiliated with the Students' Union, which gives the newspaper more latitude over the topics they write about. Though The Saint consists of a select group of writers, editors, and illustrators, its purpose is to write about the student experience at St Andrews. The Saint connects directly with the student community by having its writers spend an hour handing out the paper in popular places like the library or Union each publication. The Saint connects with the broader St Andrews community by reporting on new additions to the town to keep locals updated. Our interviewee stated the writers try to make sense of the town's cultural i

identity and explore the experience of living in St Andrews. The writers bring diverse views to the table and hope that their pieces help students better understand what it means to be part of the University of St Andrews. The Saint connects with other societies as well, as societies often reach out to The Saint and inquire if a writer wishes to report on the event or showcase are hosting major events or showcasing talent. In this way, The Saint provides a platform for student art initiatives and raises awareness for events happening at the University. Overall, The Saint keeps students informed and can help students make sense of the town and the University's cultural identity.

4.0 Policy Recommendations

Drawing from the interviews and the survey, this section outlines a set of general and group-specific policy recommendations aimed at improving accessibility and support for student-led artistic initiatives at the University of St Andrews to create a more inclusive and diverse environment.

4.1 General Recommendations: The Establishment of a Student Arts and Initiatives Office

A recurring issue identified in interviews is the lack of structural support for student initiatives, for both those affiliated and unaffiliated with the University, either with the Student Union or the Athletic Centre. Without a formal framework to guide them, students are often left to manage legal contracts, budgeting, ethical compliance, and administrative logistics with little or no training. This not only creates inefficiencies but also places disproportionate pressure on volunteers who are also managing academic commitments.

To address this gap, the University should establish a Student Arts Initiatives Office, or alternatively, appoint a dedicated officer within its existing administration. This officer would provide guidance on the issues previously mentioned such as navigating contracts or coordinating venue bookings. For example, when student groups invite external speakers or collaborate with third-party organisations, they would be able to rely on this officer for advice on liability and safeguarding.

4.2 Society-Specific Recommendations

4.2.1 St Andrews Dance Club

Despite the Dance Club's significant progress in improving access and representation, its growth is constrained by limited rehearsal space and scheduling options, which prevents the group from incorporating a wider range of dance styles, particularly those that reflect diverse cultural traditions.

To address the issue, the University should expand rehearsal space availability. This could be achieved by reallocating underused campus rooms during evenings and weekends, extending booking hours, or partnering with local venues in town. Increasing physical space would directly support the Club's mission to represent the student body more fully and allow for the inclusion of less commonly represented dance forms.

4.2.2 Photography Society

The Photography Society has struggled to create an environment that supports both beginners and more advanced photographers. The perceived skill gap discourages advanced students from joining or fully engaging.

A practical solution would be the creation of a Digital Arts Platform, a centralised online space where societies can post events, share resources, and facilitate peer mentorship. For the Photography Society specifically, this could help foster collaboration between and within ability levels, encourage interdisciplinary projects, and reduce barriers to entry for students new to the field.

4.2.3 People You Know Productions

As a non-Union-affiliated theatre group, People You Know faces structural disadvantages, especially when it comes to booking rehearsal and performance venues. Their unofficial status limits their ability to participate in key University systems, which in turn restricts their ability to grow and reach broader audiences.

To support groups like this, the University should implement a Community Venue Allocation Scheme. Under this scheme, unaffiliated yet recognised student initiatives would be eligible to access rehearsal and performance spaces on campus or in town at low or no cost. In return, groups could be asked to offer public performances or host community-inclusive events. This exchange would ensure reciprocal value while promoting accessibility and inclusion.

4.2.4 The Saint Newspaper

The Saint holds a unique position on campus as an independent publication that contributes to accountability and transparency. While collaborating with the University's communications office offers some support, the relationship lacks a formal framework, leaving potential gaps in editorial protection, especially concerning the legalities of interviewing individuals.

To protect its independence while ensuring mutual cooperation, the University should establish a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) with The Saint. This would clarify expectations around access to information, interviews, and ethical standards, while explicitly affirming editorial autonomy. Such a measure would protect journalistic integrity and reinforce the value of student media in campus life.

4.2.5 FS (Fashion Show)

FS is one of the University's most prominent cultural events, but its high-ticket prices and exclusive reputation limit participation. While proceeds are directed to charity, costs prevent many students from attending and therefore, prevent them from being a part of the cultural life of St Andrews.

The University should work with FS to establish a Subsidised Ticket and Participation Fund. This fund would support students from lower-income backgrounds, enabling them to attend the event or participate in behind-the-scenes roles. It could be financed through a combination of FS profits, University grants, and private sponsorship. This initiative would help reshape public perception, widen participation, and further FS's goal of celebrating diverse student creativity.

5.0 Conclusion

This report finds that student-led arts initiatives occupy a vibrant and impactful place in the St Andrews community, with over 95% of 40+ survey respondents reporting that student-led arts initiatives impact the culture of St Andrews (see Appendix I). At the same time, a key theme in the student survey and interviews is that St Andrews has a large array of arts societies that cover multiple genres and forms of representation. However, there are still limitations in supporting, providing access to, and strengthening ties with all segments of the St Andrews community through programming that reaches beyond high-income and white students. As this study interviewed mainly larger University societies, the limited sample size prevents it from representing the entire arts scene. Nevertheless, building on the efforts already made by the societies interviewed in this report to widen access, this policy brief aims to provide further recommendations highlighting student experiences with societies and offer outcomes regarding accessibility, support for engagement, and inclusion of diverse student voices. Although the research methodology gathered data from different artistic mediums to broadly represent 'the arts', the sampling techniques failed to include the voices of societies from non-dominant communities through our interviews, constituting a key research limitation. This research has revealed divergent perceptions of inclusivity about St Andrews' cultural identity, representing only the first step in understanding societies' impact on the St Andrews community identity. Further investigation involving societies and initiatives which platform voices of those from minority identities could provide insights into overcoming exclusivity and better showcase the broader array of cultural arts that reflect the diversity of the University of St Andrews' population.

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Appendices

A.

Interview Questions:

1. What does your society do, what is your role in it?
2. How does your society interact with the community?
3. How do you view St. Andrews' cultural identity? How did your society help you understand it?
4. How do you hope your society will contribute to the community? Are there any challenges you face when interacting/engaging with St Andrews? If so, what is it, and how can this be remedied? What support would you look for?
5. In what ways have you connected with the local town community through your society?
6. What role does the Students' Association (Union) play in supporting or limiting your society?

B.

Interview with St Andrews Dance Club

1. What does your society do, and what is your role in it?

Students and non-students up to 60

2. How does your society interact with the community?

Outreach, charity (support group through ED), volunteering

Can collection drives (bring a friend and a can)

Junior Saint Programme. (teaching dance to children 4-7)

Collab with other uni groups (empower her)

Afrobeat, breakdancing

Winter: no audience show (only dance club members)

Spring: Byre, anyone can come watch

Competitive team shows: open to the public

3. How do you view St. Andrews' cultural identity?

- Selective (some groups, high barrier to entry)

- Dance club: as accessible as possible, no experience needed (all level classes) -

Financially accessible as well (first club to offer bursing, only club that fundraises for the bursaries, they take donations)

- General membership lowest sport club membership (44£ all year) - Disability: all volunteers DSN trained, mental barriers or physical barriers, modification for dancers

- View change: so accessible, culture, so many different people that join, all over the world, different backgrounds (financial, highland dancing)

4. How did your society help you understand it?

5. How do you hope your society contributes to the community?

- Highlight the diversity of the community, by giving a spotlight to more cultural dance (afrobeat, saint LGB, queer aspect of dance),

6. Are there any challenges you face when interacting/engaging with St Andrews? If so, what is it, and how can this be remedied? What support would you look for? - No drama,

- Part of athletic union, not university union

- Issues: staff around uni b/c busy

7. In what ways have you connected with the local town community through your society?

8. What role does the Students' Association (Union) play in supporting or limiting your society?

- Own member of staff that looks over them, don't have a director of sports (that other clubs have, tennis basketball hockey) smaller clubs don't have the, only two years ago, where they share one

- Pay for venues for classes sportscenter studio + bookings in town hall), but venue for show they have to pay

- Assist with team competition payment

- More professional conduct themselves, formal contracts, doesn't support iwthe party if things approve contracts, support if something goes wrong

9. Do you think you play a role in fostering a sense of community on campus? If yes, why and how? If not, why?

- Dance as a whole, for self-identity, gives people a place to express themselves - Ver streamline club for everyone to join (+ different styles)

- Comfortable financial positions (form shows) + student volunteers (teacher or choreographers not paid)

- No space or time for more dance styles

- Athletic and uni separated

C.

Interview with Photography Society

What does your society do, what is your role in it?

- Will is the co-president of St Andrews's Photography Society, which seeks to both introduce St Andrews students to photography and the darkroom (and providing assistance e.g. lending equipment to people who do not have cameras) while also providing a place for skilled photographers to engage with others

How does your society interact with the community?

- Will says that biweekly 'photo walks' are a core part of the society and its connection to the St Andrews community. He says that they are 'part-social' and 'part-photography', as they chat while walking around the town visiting various sites. Furthermore, the society puts on both workshops and events to engage with photographers of all skills levels and experiences. He says the community is 'very good' at the society, Will

- says that many students who may have cameras come to the society in order to learn how to use them. With the darkroom, the society seeks to provide students with experience in an art form that is often expensive to pursue individually and is increasingly difficult to find supplies for

How do you view St. Andrews' cultural identity? How did your society help you understand it?

- Will says for a smaller school that lacks an academic fine arts programme, St Andrews has a very 'lively' arts scene that is student-led. He sees the photography society as providing a 'spot for photographers to meet other photographers people'

How do you hope your society will contribute to the community? Are there any challenges you face when interacting/engaging with St Andrews? If so, what is it, and how can this be remedied? What support would you look for?

- At £15 for darkroom membership (which includes access to the facilities, the ability to loan a camera, and chemicals for developing), the society offers access to a hobby which would normally be much more expensive to pursue. Nevertheless, Will describes how the society has faced challenges from 'two sides': getting beginners to feel comfortable with the society and become more active, and getting skilled student photographers to engage with the society (which they often see as for those who are learning). Although Will says there is 'not much' that can be done beyond their generous offerings of camera loaning and informational workshops, he feels the society has been making an effort this year to have more events to attract and engage talented student photographers.

Furthermore, although the society is doing outreach with University staff, it is mainly student-focused and does not focus on outreach with the wider town.

What role does the Students' Association (Union) play in supporting or limiting your society?

- Will describes the Union as being very supportive, responsive, and generous. They provide and maintain the darkroom free of charge, and were very helpful when organising the special disposal that is required for the spent chemicals.

D.

Interview with People You Know Productions

What does your society do, what is your role in it?

- People You Know is a student-run group that puts on student-written plays. Tatiana is not an official committee member, but is 'shadowing' the group's leaders and can potentially take over as time goes on. Tatiana has worked as a co-director for the recent production of Antonis, and has acted and directed a few plays last year.

How does your society interact with the community?

- People You Know makes a great effort to engage with the wider St Andrews town, and Tatiana says the society is more involved with the town due to its non-uni affiliation and has been particularly successful in its graphics and marketing campaign towards students. Tatiana highlights that the group stages workshops and auditions at Aikman's Bar and advertises at the coffee shop Taste, places she describes as popular with

students ('where students actually go'). Furthermore, the productions are open and advertised to the wider town, making it not exclusively for students, though students and their parents are the main target, as students involvement is a key tenet of People You Know Productions.

How do you view St. Andrews' cultural identity? How did your society help you understand it?

- Seeing peers helped Tatiana, as People You Know was the first place she met fellow students who liked theatre.

How do you hope your society will contribute to the community? Are there any challenges you face when interacting/engaging with St Andrews? If so, what is it, and how can this be remedied? What support would you look for?

- A significant challenge, Tatiana notes, is the perception held by some students that the society is not welcoming, admitting that it may have 'seemed closed off' as if the society was originally a 'group of friends'.

Nevertheless, Tatiana notes how the society has been making a conscious effort to put on plays by new members, and is hosting community events such as a playwriting workshop, which entails getting people involved and building their confidence

What role does the Students' Association (Union) play in supporting or limiting your society?

- The society is all student-run, though it was created to be non-Union affiliated. It was formed 3 years ago as a platform to show a play that was rejected by Mermaids, the Union-affiliated playwright group, and now seeks to put on 'experimental' productions all written by students where people could 'try things out', while Mermaids 'puts on more classic stuff'. This means the society has more 'flexibility' as it is not bound by Union rules. Although the society is happy with this arrangement, it does mean it is more difficult to rent spaces for example, with many practices occurring at people's houses or in the English department building. However, with the On the Rocks festival the society was granted the ability to stage productions at the Union.

E.

Interview with The Saint

What does the Saint do, and what is your role in it?

The saint is the university's independent student-run newspaper. It's not union affiliated, which is really important. It stopped being union affiliated in 1997. So basically we just report on news in town and at the university. My role is deputy editor-in-chief, so I'm basically an executive, like second highest executive position on the paper.

Why did it stop being union affiliated?

I don't really know the whole history, but I feel like it was just because we started to realise that we couldn't wholly and objectively report on things at the university without not having that, like, immediate bias, I guess, if that makes

sense. I know a lot of students at other universities that I've met throughout the years who, like, have told me that because they are university-affiliated, they have to, like, have each issue approved by the university before it goes to print. So the saint does not have to do that. We send copies to the communications office just to make sure that we have our facts checked, but we've never been told like, you can't publish this. So, that's good.

How does the Saint interact with the Saint Andrews community?

I'd say that, evidently, because the town is so small, the saint effectively is Saint Andrews, student population regardless, the saint is the town of Saint Andrews' newspaper. So I think like every single time an issue comes out, we require that our writers do one hour worth of handout on the Thursday that the issue goes out. So I think it's great. Every single time that the issue comes out, we require that our writers spend an hour doing handout, so in that way, even though most of the copies are going to students because the people that write it are students and it's very much the content is targeted towards the student population, there still are like people who live in town who we hand the paper to. And in that way, it still is a way for them to get their sources of information. Obviously, Saint Andrews is mostly the university. So a lot of the news that's happening around town that we write about is university stuff, but also, for example, South Street extensions or like new cafes or new shops in town or things that I think people in the town of Saint Andrews will be interested in regardless of whether or not they're a student.

How do you view Saint Andrews as like the university's cultural identity, and how do you think the saint helps you understand it?

That's a good question. I think that one I think that what the writers want to write about is really just them trying to make sense of of the town's cultural identity in a way. Like in news, we're kind of just reporting on objective things, but I feel like in sections, like viewpoint or even the relic, our arts and culture section, or even features stories. A lot of them are talking about what it means to be a part of this town. Like, I feel like we're always trying to comment on the socioeconomic experience of living in the town and the experience of, for example, how people dress or how people act or what it's like to be an international student or things like that that. I feel like I've seen every single pitch meeting when I'm sitting in there getting pitches from the writers. It's kind of the same thing over and over again of like most of the time I take a step back and I'm like, clearly there's some greater overarching thing that we're all really curious about and wanting to kind of make sense of. And I feel like writing is the way that these students are wanting to make sense of it. I think how I would define the cultural identity is really difficult because I feel like one thing about the saint that's great is that all of our writers are from such different backgrounds. So obviously we have international students. We have Scottish students. We have people who are more interested in film studies and art history or people who are more interested in sports or the anthropological aspects. This makes it so that the things that the saint writings are all over the place and in a way that isn't itself very reflective of the student body here.

How do you hope the saint will contribute to the community? Or, how do you hope it'll continue to contribute?

I think the saint recently has been really focusing on/ investing in heavy investigation pieces. For example, like we had a friend of mine helped, Ted, uh investigation into the Fairmont and it's like history with sexual harassment. We recently published a piece where the saint had an exclusive interview with Stella Maris and we have so many more like in the works. I feel like everyone on the saint is so curious and passionate about journalism that I feel like I'm constantly getting bombarded with people being like, oh, I have a lead about this and I really want to investigate this. obviously, like the thing about being a journalist is I'm always kind of questioning if if like, if a journalist's desire is to get credit for finding or unearthing this huge story or if it's actually because they want to serve the community. I think in Saint Andrews, one thing that makes the saint particularly fun or rewarding in that aspect is that I feel like I've had moments where I've published something where I've been very proud of or I feel like I've really come up with like a new piece of information or spoke to something that I feel is undiscussed and I'll get random messages from people and have people come up to you and be like, I really resonated with this or like, thanks for writing about this or whatever. That's really what we want to be doing is just kind of talking about things. I feel like Saint Andrews is a town oftentimes, obviously with journalism, like most of these big publications that are reputable and have good names are ones that are in huge cities where there's tons of news happening. I think the thing about Saint Andrews, though, is like, yes, it is a small town, but it's very unconventional in a lot of ways. I think that there's a lot of like, I don't want to say like darker darker forces at play, but there are some things that are very normalized and casual here that people aren't talking about that I'm like, this is something that needs to be written about. And in that way, Saint Andrews is very is a I think, great place to be a journalist, There's so much happening despite how yes, it's small, yes, like it's full of a certain constituency of a certain type of person. But there's a lot going on that kind of underpins that that needs to be discussed. And I think that's really what the saint wants to do and at least talking to writers. That's what they seem to want to do like, I really just want to write about what is so normalized here and is it being discussed? I like that a lot, yeah. What are like what are some challenges that you might face in in engaging with Saint Andrews? And like, if like, do you have any kind of ways to help fix it? I think a challenge that, like, regardless of where you are as a journalist, especially in a town like Saint Andrew's, is that if you critique the university or if you kind of talk about something which, like people might not want you to talk about. As a journalist, that's always a risk that you're going to take. I wrote an article kind of deep diving the treatment of student actors and creatives that are involved with Mermaids. And I remember when that came out, me and David Buckan, who's the editor-in-chief, when we co-wrote it, we were both really kind of anxious about the fact that this is such a small town. People talk. We were going to see the people that we were writing about in town. People were going to know who we were. And obviously that's like, that's something that as a journalist, like you should always be prepared for. But I think especially at university, it's like we're also just students and it kind of creates awkward situations.

I've been in situations where I have been in the same room as the people that I have been referencing in the article. And the way that we interact is very much with the underlying subtext of like, I know that you know that I wrote about you. And I'm not apologetic for it because it had to be done, but it does create an awkwardness. That being said, though, there are heavier, like more, I would say weighted pieces that we've written where we've had to like actually, where we've like, like, I don't know, the interview with Stella Maris was, did not really reflect well on the university. And obviously that's that's a huge risk for us as a student-run newspaper to take slams at the institution that we all attend. But that also wouldn't be possible if you were affiliated with the union. It's true. It's true, which is why, us not being university affiliated is such an important part to what the saint is. But do I have advice as to like how to prevent that? But I think like, as journalists, like, we all are kind of like prepped with knowing that this is something that we're going to have to deal with. I think also there is a thrill that comes with being like, yeah, like, we're writing about this and it's kind of controversial and people might get mad at us, but this is what real journalists do. Like people were mad at Carl Bernstein and Bob Woodward when they wrote about Watergate. and you know what? Not that I am comparing myself to Carl Bernsteina or Bob Woodward. But there's these risks that kind of come with being a journalist. It's a very high risk low reward job. It's just I think that's like a very, like journalistic eccentric answer.

In what ways do you feel that the saint has connected with the local town/community? By virtue of being a newspaper, we're kind of tasked with spreading information to the townspeople. I think think one thing, though, that would probably be good to remind ourselves of is that like this is the town's newspaper source. Sometimes I feel like the articles that we write, obviously they're very student focused and they absolutely should be because it's a student run publication. But I actually kind of do wish that we went outside of the bubble that is the university, if that makes sense. I think there's like, obviously we're so connected to like, this is like a town on the East Fife and there's people who aren't in their 20s who live here who don't attend the university. And um, obviously, like when they take the paper, they might flip to like our viewpoint section that's talking about like the 601 and are like, what the hell is this? So yeah, but I think we do just like, I like when we're handing out the paper and I hand it to someone who is very clearly just a local in town. And they're just like, thank you so much. Like we just love reading this every issue. And it's like, that's really great, even though you may not understand like every single thing that we're writing about because it's very student focused. It's great that you still kind of look to us as like, hey, like this is going on this week. And like, this is great, you know? I'm sure it helps them feel more connected with the university. Saint Andrews, I mean, is essentially like the golf course in the university.

I know that you're not union affiliated, but is there any role the union plays? Not the union, but we do have a very close relationship with the communications office at the university. For example, if any of our writers need to interview anyone who is hired by the university, we have to go through the communications department. So that means that we have to

draft up an email of like questions and who you want to speak to and a rough idea of the topic that we want to discuss and shoot it off to communications. We CC the editors-in-chief. Then the communications office will be like, we'll reach out to whatever staff, whatever university staff member that the person wants to speak to and set up a time. That's just for professionalism, just so that we don't have our writers like sending grammatically incorrect emails to members of university staff, um, which has happened. And then before issues come out, we send the news to the communications department and just be like, hey, just let us know if you have any queries. And they give us a rough overview and like, if there's any, like misquoted information or like stuff that we didn't fully represent, well, like they let us know when we can go in and change it. Obviously we sent a draft of issue two eight, the one that just came out with the Stella Maris interview to the communications Department. They knew we were writing about it. Nobody was going to say like, hey, you can't publish this interview with Stella Maris. There's no censorship going on at all. And I think that the Comm communications department communicates that to us so explicitly. Like they're like, even with phrasing and stuff, like they're like, we are not censoring you guys in any way, shape or form and like and like the saint wouldn't stand for that anyway. It's a very good relationship that we have with the communications department and like, that's the only way in which I guess there's a checks and balances in a way. But like I don't even want to use the word checks and I don't even want to use the phrase checks and balances because it's just um it's like respectful for the newspaper, I think, to have a good relationship with the university communications office so that we're all on the same page as to what's going on., I mean, at the end of the day, like we are all students and, we can only do so much as students, you know?

Have you done any collaborations with other art societies that are focused heavily on student art initiatives?

The only thing I can think of is sometimes student societies will reach out to us and be like, hey, we're putting on this event. Does someone from the saint want to come review it for the event section? Or I if there's like a play like that people want us to review, we're absolutely open to sending a reviewer to write about it or something. I mean, sometimes we get ads in the saint, but typically those are from businesses that are paying. I think student art initiatives more broadly, we have like illustrators. It's all illustrated by students um which is really cool. Obviously sometimes we write about student run initiatives and art projects and stuff. I guess in some ways we give platforms to student artists which is great. Like people will write about them and be like oh, you go see this play that these students worked on, and this is kind of what they're talking about. We have great work relationships with like the performing performing arts people, like the Saint Instagram gets DMs all the time being like, does someone from your does someone from the Saint wanna come review this? So, yeah, I'd say like the way that we kind of collaborate in a sense is by giving those student artists a platform in a way.

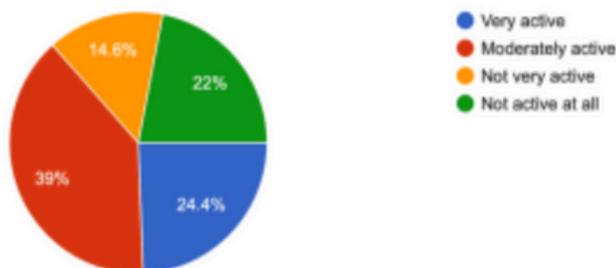
Do you know kind of a brief history of the saint, like, when it was founded or like why it was founded necessarily? Was there something that the university, maybe that the community was lacking, that the saint could bring to the table?

On our banner, it says that it was founded in 1997, though the student newspaper has pre-existed, has like always, I think, been around. It's more we unaffiliated in 1997. So that's like we just when it became the like branded the same and like very explicitly, like the independent student run newspaper. Bore that, I honestly don't really know. There actually is a great article that we have in that we published like a last semester, which is about like the Saint's archive. It's not really about our history and we're just like how we've kind of come a long way as like a publication, which kind of used to write like some like pretty grotty, like tabloid daily Mail Esque pieces like a little bit and kind of how now, like we've come such a long way and the focus of our journalism is like much more professional, I'd say, but that's not really like that's still, I think, when it was non-affiliated.

F.

Are you an active participant in theatre, dance, film, radio, music, visual arts, or similar societies at St Andrews?

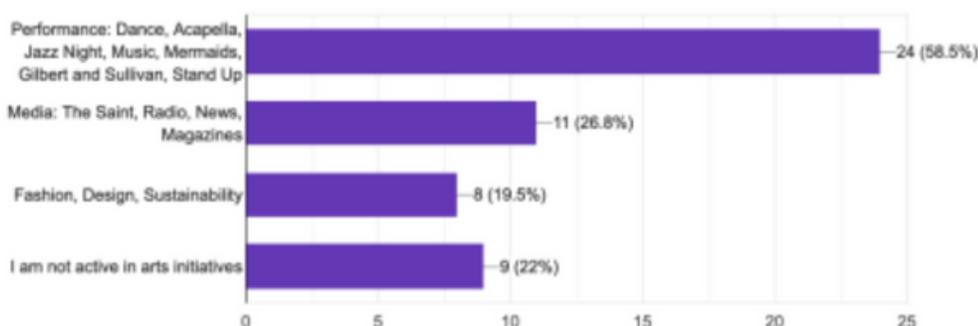
41 responses



G.

Which types of arts initiatives/societies do you attend events of? Select all that apply.

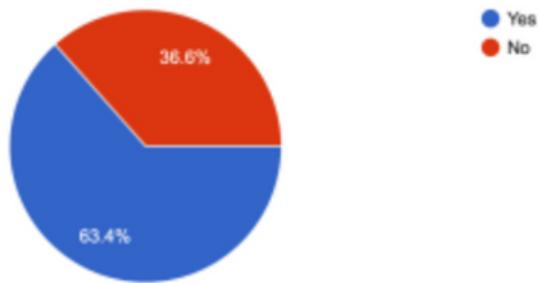
41 responses



H.

Do you feel your personal identity has been shaped by your involvement in these societies?

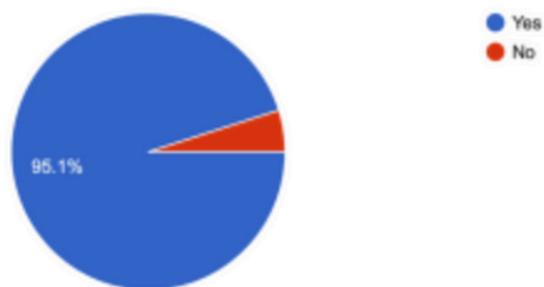
41 responses

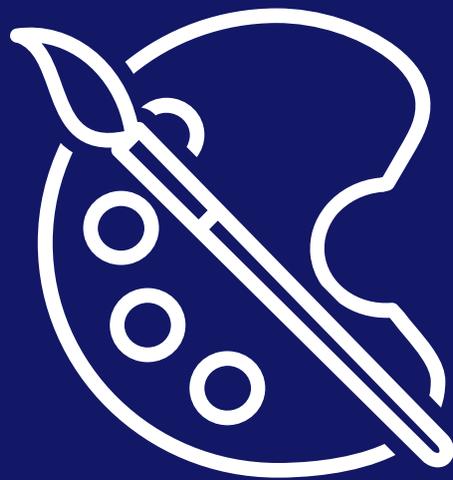


I.

Do you believe these societies have impacted the general cultural identity at St Andrews?

41 responses





**The Political Institute
of Action Research**

The Political Institute of Action Research at the University of St Andrews
April 2025