

SU Officer Role Research

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Introduction

“Has anyone else got a satellite campus officer?”

“Who represents postgraduates? Do they just represent on Education?”

“What do you mean there’s no Welsh Language Officer?”

I would be nervous trying to outline all of the characteristics of the best Students’ Unions but one thing I am sure of is that they have well thought out officer teams at their head.

A regular conundrum is getting this right and it’s difficult to get a balance between constant tweaking and letting things stand because, most awfully, things have always been that way.

I help Unions undertake officer role reviews each year and I have reviewed the sector to look at the most popular positions and offer my thoughts on the process of reviewing student leadership roles and how they interact with each other in case it is helpful to other SU colleagues.

Nick Smith

Thanks

My thanks to Tom Snape (www.linkedin.com/in/thomsnape), previously a Union Development and Democracy sabbatical officer at Keele University Students’ Union and now working at Birmingham Guild of Students, for his help collating the data used in this report.

The Inevitable and unending March of Time

The research for this project was undertaken at the start of the 2019/20 academic year (2020 has been... a year) and, inevitably, will be out of date in terms of precise numbers. However, I hope the trends and patterns will still be useful.

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Terminology

As mentioned throughout this document there are difficulties in categorisation because of slight differences in officer roles. I'll discuss these throughout but unless specifically mentioned, all references to a "VP", "Sabbatical" or simply "officer" refer to students who fulfil a representative role as a full time position, taking time out during or just after their study.

Part Time Officers (PTOs)

There is a limit to how much research I am able to do and I've restricted this work to sabbatical officers only. I don't underestimate the importance of part time officers in Unions, especially smaller ones, and the impact they can have on the wider officer team. When talking about officer roles in unions that do include PTOs their contribution and how their role should differ from sabbatical roles should clearly be taken into consideration, along with the support they might require from staff members.

The Statistics

Information was gathered from 127 HE Students' Unions across the UK. 574 officer roles were recorded, and these have been split into 21 categories. For each category I have included the number of officers and the percentage of Unions which have them.

The naming of officer roles is important and can make a big difference (VP Liberation, VP Diversity and VP Equality are all viewed in different ways). However, for this research we have categorised based on job responsibilities unless the role deliberately creates a differentiation for students within those responsibilities. So a VP Academic Affairs and VP Education may be classed together but a VP Postgraduate would be a separate area.

	President
Number: 115	Percentage: 91%

91% of Students' Unions have a lead officer role – usually named President but occasionally a General Secretary or something similar. Many presidential positions will be based on the time when universities and, therefore, unions were much smaller. There would most likely only be one full time representative and so they would be the President. Before the governance reforms of the late 2000s there was often a small section of the wider Executive Team who fulfilled Trustee Board roles and the President had a role of lead internal officer for the Union in this. As reported in my previous research on Trustee Boards¹, 65% of Unions retain the President as Trustee Board chair even now (a further 10% have a different officer).

The time which officers spend debating issues among themselves is time that they aren't spending debating issues with the university. I would argue there are times where it is useful in points of stalemate to have a president who can step in and break the deadlock so that the Union can move on. This clearly needs to be done with tact and accountability but this ability shouldn't be discounted out of hand.

More important than the internal focus, though, is what a President means or says to the students outside the Union's engaged circles, the University and the general public. A few years ago a well

¹ <https://wonkhe.com/wp-content/wonkhe-uploads/2019/04/SU-Trustee-Board-Research-2019.pdf>

known fast fashion chain produced a £5 t-shirt with “SU President” emblazoned across it. When a cast member of *Hollyoaks* runs for elected office for that week’s (usually) non-fatal storyline, it is inevitably for SU President. The role is recognised by popular culture and for Unions who feel their communication with the student membership could be improved, at least students are likely to know that Presidents exist, even if they don’t understand the wider SU structure.

One way of getting more change from your institution is by making it easier for them to understand who the changemakers are. Whenever I work in Universities and ask them about their officer teams even senior academics struggle with naming those VPs not directly related to their areas. Yet almost everyone can tell me who the President is. There no doubt should be a clearer idea about why the VP Welfare is as important as the President among an institution’s staff, but having an easily identifiable student representative is important. Universities move at glacial pace but, on occasion, something happens which causes a piece of that ice to move much quicker. In times where a quick student consultation is needed, universities will often go to the President as first point of contact rather than try and decipher the various officer job descriptions.

Flat structures

9% of Unions don’t have a President role. For the reasons outlined above, you may have guessed that I think having someone to be a lead officer in times of crisis, to be a clear port of call for the student body and the university, is very helpful indeed.

Where I have worked with unions who don’t have a clear presidential role, this often comes from a desire to have parity of esteem among the whole executive team. I think it is possible for the expertise of a portfolio based VP or the experience of an officer from a liberation background to be as well regarded as the mandate to be President, but this is about understanding that the roles are different rather than “better” or “worse”.

There are, of course, smaller Unions for whom they need roles to specialise and for whom, for example, having positions covering Education & Welfare is a higher priority than having a President and generic Vice President.

My experience is also that where there isn’t a presidential role, someone emerges as *de facto* president for that year and then it changes the following year. Alternatively, there is a role that becomes ‘presidential’ due to their contact with the university (usually Education).

I don’t want to be unfair to Unions with flat officer structures and hope that this report will create some open debate about the issue (and maybe a WonkheSUs blog or two).



Education

Number: 82

Percentage: 65%

Two thirds of all Unions have an Education Officer role (although see below for combined positions and where postgraduate and undergraduate positions have been split).

No surprises here perhaps – Students’ Unions are set up as education charities supporting people whose main occupation is education at higher educational institutions... the choice to have a role here seems relatively straightforward.

These positions often get stuck with lots of the institution’s “big issues” and as such get to have a seat at the highest tables in the university. While this means they have incredible influence, it can also be a role that is not understood by the wider student body or election candidates. I’ve seen countless students complain that their officers are “not doing any work”, when in fact they are simply

not seen because they are in the University boardroom not the Union café. In one case I've even had an Officer themselves tell me that they aren't going to go to the university meetings where they can influence student rights because it "gets in the way of their work". Universities will remain organised around committee work and meetings for the foreseeable future and Education Officers in particular need support to be skilled in these spaces and communicate their worth to other students.

One of their challenges will be collaborating with other officer positions when there are areas of overlap, but only the VP Education has a seat at the table. For example, widening access is often connected to issues of diversity, and the stresses of examination times and fulfilling the institution's regulations have a clear link with mental wellbeing and student welfare. As they spend so long in University meetings, ensuring that they can communicate efficiently with other officers on items requiring a holistic approach should be a priority.

Perhaps more than most officer roles, Education officers often have a ready-made network of students to connect and consult with in the form of course or school representatives. Again, the risk for Education officer roles can be that they don't get enough time to discuss the upcoming issues at university meetings with these networks and, in turn, the course reps feel their sabbatical is too distant from them.

I've worked for universities and in my training on meeting structures I give a clear perspective of what can work in influencing the institution's decision makers. I always warn officers of the danger of becoming so absorbed in committee life that you start thinking like a university staff member not a student representative. A close relationship can create fantastic results for students, but a degree of separation is vital.

	Welfare
Number: 78	Percentage: 61%

There are almost as many Welfare officers as there are Education officers. This is unlikely to be a big surprise as there has probably never been a time when the health of students or their accommodation needs hasn't needed attention.

The specific campaign priorities of officers clearly change, with a rise in provision for mental health support being a clear recent trend. For this reason, VP Welfare is an area where I would recommend that the name is kept broad so that the position can be more easily reactive to the needs of current students. In larger Unions recurring welfare related concerns often branch into other officer positions (principally those of community as mentioned below).


These days a division has usually (and rightly) been made between trained advice professionals offering advice to students and their representatives who try and make things better for the general student population. The difference between going to an advisor and going to a representative is not always clear to students and some Unions have renamed their Welfare officers as "Student Rights" to clarify their focus on large scale change and broad issues rather than specific welfare needs.

Also, VP Welfares are the best (only because I once was one).

VP Education and Welfare

There are a small number of Unions (3%) with Education and Welfare combined officers. A few years ago these were more prevalent but many Unions have taken the decision to split these portfolios in recent times.

Broadly these still exist in smaller Unions where the number of officers are at a premium and, perhaps, in smaller institutions where one officer faces the students and the other the university.

	Activities
Number: 74	Percentage: 58%

Activities officers here refer to Sabbaticals whose role is for sports and societies combined, often with volunteering groups included, too.

23% of Unions have a separate Sports officer² and 3.1% have a Societies role (always where a Sports officer exists). 2 Unions have combined Sport and Wellbeing.

Just as most Welfare roles should no longer be expected to do casework, the Activities and Sport roles should also be focused on representation rather than pitch bookings or ensuring society forms are correctly filled. Over the last few decades the idea of the university experience as greater than the academic worth has expanded and activities officers can have a clear and important role in those university meetings dealing with student experience.

Nurturing relationships with the Estates and Security teams allows these officer roles to gain access to rooms and pitches for their students in the immediate term but also influence the shape of campus and the expectations of how it will be used for many generations to come.

Also, VP Activities are the best (only because I once was one).

The author's obsession with Charitable purposes

While each SU is different, almost every one of them has the same charitable objects. Created in the late 2000s they represent, I believe, the whole gambit of SU work. What I also find interesting is that they are almost identical to those set up in the first Scottish SRC of the 1880s.

Most SU charitable objects are:

1. *promoting the interests and welfare of Students at [Institution] during their course of study and representing, supporting and advising Students;*
2. *being the recognised representative channel between Students and [Institution] and any other external bodies; and*
3. *providing social, cultural, sporting and recreational activities and forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of its Students*

The 4 most popular officer roles are about general representation (President), Welfare and Interests (Education and Welfare officers) and personal development (Activities). If a Union has 3 or 4 officers, then aligning to the Charitable Purposes is probably a good place to start.

²17 of which also have an Activities officer. These are usually where sport is part of the University or there is a separate Athletics' Union for competitive sport.



Faculty Officers

Number: 26 Percentage: 20%

Campus Officers

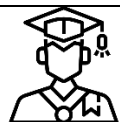
Number: 16 Percentage: 13%

There are 26 faculty specific officers across 9 different Students' Unions. These are usually because the Union has adopted a representation model based on a students' affiliation with their faculty rather than a portfolio area.

There are various reasons this may occur including putting the educational aspect of representation as paramount for students but also because that is where power lies within the institution. Universities regularly discuss whether powers should be delegated to individual faculties to be more efficient in terms of speed and focus, or centralised to be more efficient in terms of strategy and resourcing. As the pendulum swings for institutions, so too might Unions think about where their representatives are best placed to make a difference.

On occasion there is a mix between faculty and wider portfolio roles – for example medical students who may get their own full-time officer representative. Having worked in a medical school my caution would be to ensure that this officer has parity of esteem to other vice-presidents and also to ensure that they are aware of their role in relation to the team of officers and the Union outside of their faculty. This is the same as, for example, the VP Activities who must consider areas outside of student opportunities when thinking of Union strategy or their Trustee role.

8 Unions have Campus officers (a total of 16 officers) which I have included here because these campuses are based on specific modes of provision (e.g. the old Nursing college now part of the county's main university but located in a different town).



Postgraduate Officers

Number: 21 Percentage: 19%

Almost a fifth of Unions have a Postgraduate officer, mainly located in research intensive universities, but not exclusively. Undergraduate officers appear in just below 4% of Students' Unions and always when a postgraduate, full time officer is present. There is never a situation where there is solely a Postgraduate officer and no other Education officer.

Many universities are looking to expand their research communities, offering additional postgraduate courses and so increasing the number and variety of students undertaking this mode of study. In tandem, SUs are looking at postgraduate provision and how they can represent them to remain relevant to the student body at large.



No defined Portfolio

Number: 21

Percentage: 19%

Just under a fifth of officers within the sample have no portfolio. This is sometimes as a result of them being a Vice-President to a President where a Union is smaller and has two officers.

There are a number of Unions who have adopted a model of having non-portfolio officers, with their role dictated by their manifesto (sometimes with the person winning the most votes becoming President).

This is possibly the purist form of being a “representative” and allowing the electorate to dictate each year what the officer team should do. It allows them to be flexible to emerging needs at the institution.

My caution is that I think these roles need additional explanation for the student body and where strategic work takes several years to complete, having a political home for projects would need to be thought through. Who will politically lead 3-year Education programmes if no candidate has campaigned on an educational platform? If the supporting policy setting and accountability structures around the officer teams are sufficiently developed, this will be mitigated.



Community Officers

Number: 19

Percentage: 16%

On one level “Town and Gown” conversations are as tedious as they are enduring. As Universities seek to become more “civic” and tensions continue between students and other local residents (where a minority of students live at home), the idea of a community portfolio role has developed. Or at least sometimes.

When undertaking officer role reviews I have often found the definition of the Community officer as somewhat vague. Broadly, they fit into 3 types or a combination of them all.

- 1) A “pastoral” role – linked to the Welfare officer and very much focused on bridging a gap between the student community and other people locally.
- 2) A “civic” role – sometimes linked to “Democracy” and expected to promote engagement in local elections, public engagement or volunteering work.
- 3) A “belonging” role – essentially building community *within* the university community not beyond it. Some of this is work replicated or covered elsewhere.

I like flexibility within an officer job description so that an electorate can use the manifestos and pledges of candidates to shape what will be carried out. However, if a “Community” officer has been created to fill a particular need (pastoral, civic or belonging) this needs to be clear. Otherwise the hope that students will feel part of their Union fails while they are told to vote for the town mayor or the local council demonises students while they pick up litter at the weekend.



Diversity Officers

Number: 14

Percentage: 11%

Just over a tenth of Unions have a full-time officer dedicated to supporting marginalised students separated from Welfare roles.

Of all officers, perhaps this is the one where terminology is most sensitive. Liberation is different from Diversity is different from Equal Opportunities. The tension here is that the role must be clear to those who need it; push boundaries for those who are uneducated in its necessity; and also fit into a wider understanding within the university.

Given the perception among some that Students' Unions are obsessed with "niche activism" and its direct or indirect link with marginalised students, the fact that just above 10% of Unions having a full-time officer for this role may seem surprising. Authenticity of voice is particularly important in this type of representation and many Unions have opted to have part time officers from different backgrounds or even presidents of student groups to work on these areas. Unions should consider resourcing implications as well as how a profile can be built within the University for a student who is not in a full-time role but needs access to decision makers.



The rest...

There are 61 different officer roles not included above.

- 6 Finances and Services officers (5 in large commercial Unions with lots of staff, 1 in a small Union with few staff)
- 6 International Student officers
- 5 Women's officers
- 4 Campaigns officers
- 3 Democracy officers
- 3 Welsh officers (disappointingly these are all based in Welsh Universities)
- 34 other roles (held by 2 or fewer officers)

There are some clear reasons why these other roles have been selected for their particular institutions but are not widespread. Some universities have a strong international or Welsh population and need these positions but there are probably few Welsh speakers at UHISA.

In other cases, they seem to reflect a need that has been identified in the Union's previous provision. Someone thought that the answer to low voter engagement was to have a "Democracy" Officer.

Others may relate to historical positions. Where finance and services officers (or Treasurers) were more common a few years ago, the development of Trustee Boards and focus on campaigning and representation means these have reduced dramatically. There may still be a need for some Unions to have these roles but it can't be a bad thing to check their relevance.

Which Officer Roles should you have?

With over 100 different student bodies, the needs of students which officers need to respond to are incredibly diverse. Unions will have different budgets and capacities and so, as you would imagine, I offer proposals not magic bullets here. The points I consider when doing officer role reviews are below.

Who is talking to the officers? Why is this important? Student representatives need a constituency to represent. This might be a faculty, or based on a general interest of the student body, or a type of student. How does the student body identify itself and, by extension, what identities does it want reflected to others by its officer roles?

Who are the officers talking to? Why is this important? Student representatives need someone to represent views to. The meetings they attend and persons they lobby might be obvious for an Education officer but what about the Democracy officer? Is the Union talking to changemakers in the University and local community through its portfolio of officers? Are the officers relevant to the University's aspirations – do you have a postgraduate officer as the University shrinks its provision in this area?

How are they filling their time? An officer role that is focused on bureaucracy and internal Union processes will be less able to make lasting changes to the educational experience of students. What projects, campaigns and representations might fill the day of someone in this role?

How does this work as a team? Collectivism and joint working are a value and a necessity of Students' Unions. Most cannot possibly have an officer for every situation or be present at every university committee. Are there areas of deliberate overlap – for example, diversity in sport, postgraduate welfare, improving democratic involvement by international students? What mechanisms allow officers to talk to each other regularly and meaningfully about their work.

Will these be relevant for the next 5 years? It's a cliché to say things are changing quickly in the world, but also very true. I would recommend that Unions review their portfolios every 5 years or so. However, when they do the question is whether there is likely to be a place for the portfolio of work in the immediate future. Considering both the Union and Institutional strategies can be useful for this.

Should I ignore this research? As I mentioned in my research on democratic forums, I think there is limited use in comparing officer teams based on "type". Universities can have the same entry tariffs, run similar courses, be geographically close and still have very different student bodies. Much more important than knowing what students in other universities have said they want for their officer roles is knowing what your students want from *their* Union.

Services to Unions

I've spent the past 15 years working in supporting leaders, volunteers and staff in charities and Higher Education Institutions unpick issues such as the ones I outline above. I would be willing to talk about how I can help your Union. This could be offering expertise for an internal process or offering capacity to undertake the whole review package.

My work developing model governing documents for Students' Unions was used as an example of good practice in the House of Lords. I have a particular background in Students' Unions of all sizes and the specific challenges which they face as campaigning, representing and service delivery organisations. I have held roles as Company Secretary for NUS and NUS Charitable Services, an Assistant Registrar for Governance at a Russell Group University, and Executive Officer within a leading UK Medical School.

I am Board Clerk to a number of Students' Unions across the UK, as well as the policy website Wonkhe.com

My services include

- Democracy Reviews
- Governance and Trustee Board Reviews and support for incorporation
- Training for Trustees, Trustee Chairs and Board Clerks
- Training on engaging with University power structures and getting wins in institutional meetings
- Compliance Support for areas including data protection, the 1994 Education Act and Codes of Practice

"Thank you for the thoughtfulness, consideration and thoroughness of your report - genuinely a joy to read and it is already proving to be hugely beneficial in developing our organisation's conversations... and finding ways through in this journey of reviewing and changing our structures"

SU Staff member following a governance review

"As a new CEO in a new sector, Nick has been invaluable to me. His knowledge and experience of Student Union governance is second to none. Nick's work on reviewing our governance and democracy process was brilliantly done – carried out thoroughly and with great sensitivity to our context. It has been this experience which has really demonstrated what I think sets Nick apart - his flexibility, his commitment, and his ability to translate and explain really complex processes and requirements... I can't recommend him highly enough to others."

SU Chief Executive

I am very happy to talk about opportunities and my rates, which I aim to keep flexible for Students' Union clients.

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