

Creating the Future

Students' Associations and College Partnerships



Comann nan Oileanach Sabhal Mòr Ostaig – introducing funded student president post at our students' association

Outline of Development

Our small specialist Gaelic college is legally obliged to have a students' association, however the key officer positions have never been paid, and the posts have typically been filled by full-time students doing the jobs in addition to their studies. The students' association was able to support the college in making the case for a funded post, and the second year of this model is now beginning. This case study outlines the value and impact of this, as well as some reflections from the incumbent. Views are therefore the author's own and may not necessarily be shared by the college.

The idea of a paid student president had been floated several times over the years, as had that of a student engagement officer as staff support, but it had never been followed through. The college is at the start of a period of change, not only because of regionalisation but also with internal developments at the college itself and issues in Gaelic Medium Education in general. The students' association officers developed an understanding of the changes and threats to the college and how the students' association could help through this period. This convinced the college management to fund the president post, even at a time when the sector as a whole is facing financial constraints.

To summarise the main issues:

Student participation in college committees. The college's committee structure includes a place for a student rep on most committees, but the effectiveness of this varied due to the volunteer nature of the role, and the timing of several important meetings outside term-time. The president is now the default student rep on all college committees, and attending these is one of the main functions of the job. It means the committee secretary knows exactly who to contact and there is a direct link with the student representative committee, which the president chairs. It means the president understands who does what and can more effectively bring forward student suggestions. It has allowed, for instance, the president to spend time researching previous minutes and avoid the past danger of taking the whole year to develop an understanding of committees and make an effective impact.

Student Facilities. The students' association operates a social space with TV, pool table etc, but a lack of supervision resource led to neglect and misuse. The president is now based in the building and can therefore help prevent and reduce waste and inappropriate use. Having the extra time also means that the president can fundraise and improve facilities.

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Distance and part time students. Despite the college's large full-time HE cohort, a substantial part of the colleges business includes a further education distance learner programme, and short courses which are usually held outside of term time. However the students' association's engagement with these students was non-existent. The president is now on campus all year round and makes a point of interacting with short course students and distance learners when they are on the premises, giving them a direct and informal link to the college committee system, even if they're only on a short course. Students who are maybe mature professionals studying Gaelic as an interest have just the same right to feel ownership of their studies and feel a part of the college community, at a time when a plethora of other providers are expanding alternative offerings. The FE courses also provide an access link to the full-time HE courses with many potential full time students trying the college out for a week or two before committing to a full-time course, so the presence of a well-run students' association will obviously be a factor in their decision. Plans to involve distance learners in the student engagement process during the academic year are on-going and there will be further progress this coming semester.

Engagement with other student organisations. A great many issues affecting the learning experience have their roots in national activity such as regionalisation or the many financial challenges facing universities and colleges. The previous unpaid status of the post of students' association president allowed for only limited involvement with the work and campaigns of the University of the Highlands and Islands Students' Association (UHISA) and the National Union of Students (NUS), due to, for instance, major meetings and conferences clashing with academic commitments. The sabbatical status, however, has allowed the president to become much more involved in, for instance, learning from other student presidents and taking examples of established good practice back to our own association, and raising substantially the profile of our association and our college in the outside world by engaging with the wider student movement.

Competition within our sector. Sabhal Mòr Ostaig is not the only provider of Gaelic learning opportunities, and cannot expect to match the facilities offered by big city universities and their long established and well-funded unions, but we have to offer the best we can and try somehow to narrow the gap.

Past (non-sabbatical) presidents pressed for the sabbatical status, and upon agreement from the Board of Management, the first sabbatical was given the freedom by the college to develop the students' association. It is early days as systems are developed but the importance of engagement with UHISA, NUS and sparqs events in developing our SA cannot be understated. While the college has been supportive it has respected the autonomy of the students' association, so it's through this external support that the position has mostly developed.

Perhaps the best evidence of the success of the sabbatical status is not as clearly visible, in terms of in the college committee system receiving effective student engagement as it should and the student building being kept in good order. Meanwhile the higher profile of the sabbatical post resulted in our first contested election for many years with turnout at 76%, although this was students based at the campus only and did not include distance learners. A wide ranging research into student representation The Highlands and Islands area is about to commence and we look forward to their assessment of our progress so far.

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Key Challenges:

“So what exactly is your job?” There were high expectations of the sabbatical post and many members of staff thought that the president would be there to help them with their role, and the student body, who had always been well motivated in organising ceilidhs and events thought they could now just relax and leave the president to it. However the incumbent spends most of their time in their office preparing for meetings and writing reports and, and there is potentially a gap between expectation of the role among staff and students and the reality, because the position naturally is only one post and cannot be everything that many had hoped for. The role requires, and makes possible, a lot of time away at UHISA, NUS and sparqs events, and while these are extremely important and gives the college and students representation at a national level the tangible, immediate benefit of this engagement to students and staff on the ground is often less clear.

Working with staff. Student officers are change bringers, that’s effectively the point of the job but obviously there will be a range of responses from staff to the ideas brought forward by a more effective president, and so there will have to be a major cultural shift for the board and college staff in working with a president who has much more time to raise the standard and quality of student engagement. This is both a challenge and opportunity for staff who may not have worked with such effective student representation before, particularly in the early years of the sabbatical, and who may not expect or appreciate the value of such an equipped, effective and informed engagement.

The college and its related student association are different things. Perceptions of a sabbatical students’ association post vary, and in such cases there is always a risk of confusion between such posts and those of normal staff positions, for instance with regards to line management, expenses and training. There is much work to do to inform both staff and students that the president is an elected political post and management comes from the student body, and while some guidance can come from college management and the board, their priorities must be guided politically by the students.

Over-reliance on sabbatical post – “he gets paid to do it, so why should I bother?” Our association always had good social events, but the introduction of a paid president has seen some degree of over-reliance on the incumbent to do everything. It is important therefore that there are other officers in place, such as a vice president or social convener. The point of a paid role at our college has been primarily so that the post can more effectively take on representation and governance work that unpaid presidents simply don’t have the time for, but other activities in the social or sporting sphere still require others’ involvement.

Democracy and succession planning. A paid post can only be held by any officer for a maximum of two terms, and there will always be risks with succession such as, unexpected withdrawals from post or a failure to meet the expectations of students. Therefore our students’ associations has realised it is important to encourage a wide range of students to get involved at all levels, to generate contested elections, and ensure a collective commitment from the student body to continue its work.

It will take years to build a professionally-run students’ association that the institution will respect and trust, and the best defence against this continued development stalling is a well-trained, motivated SRC and an engaged electorate that will properly vet those going for the top job. Structures are required to ensure today’s class reps go on to be tomorrow’s executive, and that they get the best training they can.

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