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| Good Working Relationships: Student Officers and Staff |
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| Guidance on good working relationships between student officers and staff support for students’ associations |
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The relationship between student officers and support staff is often a very complicated one. While both have different roles in the work of the students’ association, more often than not officers, support staff, and college staff in general have very different understandings and expectations of who does what, and who is held accountable.

The following list of ideas are suggestions for developing a positive working relationship between officers and staff to ensure roles are defined and responsibilities are clear, enabling the union to operate effectively. Ten areas for development have been identified and explored in more detail below:

1. Clear, Defined Roles
2. Staff Protocol
3. Challenging Incorrect Expectations
4. Training
5. Networking and Support
6. Communication
7. Planning Events and Activities
8. Accountability
9. Line Management
10. Acknowledgement

**1. Clear, Defined Roles**

Staff and officers need to fully understand the responsibilities and priorities the other group has. It is rare for only one thing to be happening at any one time! Student Officers will be juggling meetings, campaigns and running an office, while staff often have other responsibilities alongside supporting the students’ association such as enrichment, tutorials or a role within student services. As well as ensuring job descriptions clearly outline who is responsible for what with regard to students’ association activities, keep in mind that other events and responsibilities will also have to be taken into account.

**2. Staff Protocol**

Elected students are responsible for making decisions on policy and campaigns, and staff are employed for their skills and expertise to support the elected officers in their work. A staff protocol outlining this relationship and line of accountability can help to explain to others how association activity is organised. Often, colleges hold the member of staff accountable for union activity as they believe it is their job to safeguard all students’ association work. While the staff member may support and motivate individual officers, or facilitate association activities, the college should understand that it is the officers who ultimately take responsibility for all students’ association work. Developing a Staff Protocol in conjunction with having defined roles (as above) for staff and officers can help with the wider understanding of how unions and staff work together.

**3. Challenging Incorrect Expectations**

Where colleges are not aware of, or have the wrong expectations of, what student officers and support staff are responsible for, there are a few things to try.

i) Build up the working relationship with the staff and student leadership teams; the more senior management works with student officers, the more they should trust and engage with them. Staff should encourage senior management to come to officers directly, challenging the concept that the staff member is the students’ association.

ii) Offer training about the students’ association during Staff Development Weeks. Provide definitions of a students’ associations and explain how the benefits of operating autonomously positively impact the college as well. Highlight the relevant legislation that explains lines of accountability and the boundaries within which the students’ association works, such as the 1994 Education Act, Charity Law (if applicable) and Ultra Vires. Explain the new clauses relating to students’ associations in the Post-16 Act, and their role in Outcome Agreements. Be knowledgeable on current government legislation in the college sector and explain the role of the students’ association within this.

iii) Dedicate a page on the college intranet or VLE to the Students’ Association. Include a section that introduces the student officers and the staff support, explaining their different roles and making it clear when and how other teams in the college can engage with them.

**4. Training**

Training and skill development in any role is essential. Officers and staff should ensure there is a comprehensive handover between executive committees as each new term begins to ensure association activity continues to develop. As well as internal training, they can also access NUS training events such as Supporting College Student Governors and “I am the Change”. It is equally important for support staff to fully understand the student movement and the developments of students’ associations within colleges.

**5. Networking & Support**

One of the best aspects of the student movement is the desire to share best practice and experiences between the membership. From networking days, online forums, NUS events and facebook there are many opportunities for staff and students to regularly link up with others in a similar role. Whether you are new to the movement or have been involved for some time, students’ associations within the college sector are still relatively new and, as such, are continually developing. We are all on a learning curve. Don’t worry if you are unsure of your role – whether as an officer or staff – there are lots of people up and down the country ready to support you and help you in your work!

**6. Communication**

It is very important for officers and support staff to meet and talk regularly. While staff and officers have different responsibilities, you are still working together as a team. You could argue the best team in the college! As well as understanding each other’s role, get to know everyone within the team. Find out why everyone got involved, what interests them and why they are passionate about the student movement. Perhaps go out for lunch to get to know each other better at the beginning of the year or make time to have a tea break from time to time. It is also important to keep in touch with each other throughout the week. Make an agreement to always check emails at least once a week or to have a dedicated time for association work. As a responsive team, it is important to be able to react quickly, with the support of the whole team behind you.

**7. Planning events and activities**

There will be many occasions where officers and staff will be working together on events and projects. When planning any activity ensure it is clear who is going to take responsibility for what and, if necessary, divide up all activities and assign a person to each task. Don’t take it for granted that the other person knows that something is their responsibility – they might think it is yours! Remember the point above regarding the multitude of responsibilities officers and staff have: work together as a team to make events and projects successful.

There will also be work which officers must take responsibility for as the elected student leader, but where the skill and expertise of staff will be required to guide its completion. (For example, writing and delivering training, and managing finances). Be clear who is ultimately held accountable and what role each person has in the execution of these tasks. There are different roles, at different levels, that support staff might be employed in from admin support to association manager. These staff are not responsible for leading the association, and setting its strategic direction – that is the elected officers role. Their role is to facilitate and support the tasks and projects officers undertake. Without this support officers would not be able to achieve as much as they do; it is important to acknowledge the role that staff play.

**8. Accountability**

Students’ associations operate within clear structures and are guided by embedded legislation and formalised rules. As well as understanding the individual roles of officers and staff, an understanding of the operation of an association as a whole is important. A students’ association is a democratic organisation and as such mechanisms of accountability are built into the constitution to enable the membership to hold their elected leaders to account. The membership through Student Council (or equivalent) can call upon a “vote of no confidence” to remove an officer from post if they deem his or her work to be unsatisfactory (see individual constitutions for the definition of unsatisfactory and the stages of this process). Equally, staff are bound by a contract with the college to act professionally at all times and if staff are not abiding by this contract, a complaint or disciplinary may be called against them. In terms of a positive working relationship between officers and staff, it is important to understand that officers and staff are held to account through different mechanisms, but that both are committed to act responsibility and professionally in their roles.

**9. Line Management**

Perhaps one of the most contentious areas of officer-staff relationships is the process of line management. In many colleges, especially where sabbatical officers are in place, a member of college staff is appointed as the line manager as this will fit with college structures and lines of accountability. As explained above, however, accountability of officers is through its membership, not the college. Despite this, in many cases, colleges still have a role in ensuring officers have access to the benefits and support that ‘management’ provides. It might be a case of developing a positive, trusting relationship between college and students’ association, or just exploring alternative structures. The following suggestions can be agreed as a staged process of development to increase the levels of union autonomy whilst retaining a good working relationship with the college.

360 degree reviews

This process can apply to staff and students. A number of staff and students are identified to review the work of an officer or member of staff to gain a broad assessment of the effectiveness of an individual. For example, a member of Student Parliament, an Exec Officer, a Class Rep and a senior manager might reflect on the work of the President and/or member of staff. Questions are set and guidance is provided to ensure a fair reflection of the individual’s work.

Matrix System

This process acknowledges that Exec Officers are accountable only to their student membership, but also that the college has a duty of care to all individuals in the college. In this system, a member of staff is appointed as a line manager, but in welfare terms only. They are available to support the officer in working within the college, essentially to ensure they are well and happy, but the setting and appraisal of union work is completed at Student Council only.

SU employed

A growing number of unions in further education are employing their own staff teams. Student Presidents line-manage staff and are responsible for their appraisals; their own appraisal is managed through Student Council. It is important that the correct training and support is in place for all individuals involved.

Whichever structure is adopted, it is important to acknowledge that this is not about power and control, but effective management. For an individual to be an effective manager it is imperative that they fully understand the role and responsibilities of individuals involved, as well as the overall function of the association, to ensure the personal and professional development of those involved.

**10. Thank you!!**

It is more likely that an individual will enjoy their work, and therefore work harder, if they feel that their effort is acknowledged and achievements celebrated. Take the time to acknowledge the team effort and simply say “thank you” for the effort everyone makes – especially where it is not always obvious who has been involved in the work. Often colleges only congratulate staff for facilitating association events without acknowledging the involvement of officers, who are often voluntary, throughout the activity. Similarly, some associations will be solely accredited with the success of a project despite staff involvement behind the scenes. You work hard together as a team, therefore should share any achievements and celebration of this, together!