

Strategic Support Unit Briefing

The Importance of Officer Induction and Ongoing Development

At this time of year Students' Unions right across the country are gearing up for their Elections where the future stars of the movement make their first move towards representing the rights of students; deciding whether to stand or re-run? It's that exhilarating time when prospects for the future create excitement and momentum making it a joy to be part of the student movement. In all of my work as a trainer and facilitator with union staff, one of the common motivators has been the officers' journey, being there as they get elected, learn the ropes and flourish but also in supporting them when the going gets tough.

The pace of a students' union election campaign can be heady, exciting, nerve wracking, exhausting and emotional. After a successful election many officers-elect enjoy the pride and elation at being entrusted with their position. Yet the burden of that trust can be daunting! Many officers-elect develop loose plans for changes they want to make and the type of officer they want to be. Yet this is often with little practical experience, knowledge of resource, understanding of legal constraints or of the time and capacity it will take, this can be tough!

It is a challenge for students' unions to ensure the transition from officer elect to union officer is not a slam into reality that sends officers motivation, working relationships and ambitions scattered. When the handover and induction period has been carefully planned taking into account respectful boundaries in working relationships, expectations within their remit and a realistic year plan with tangible time frames for outputs, outcomes and impacts, then we have set the scene for the student movement magic to happen!

The officer summer induction checklist:

- Equip officers with core skills: time management, prioritising, consultation and communication, decision making, trusteeship, campaign planning, lobbying
- Enable Officers to recognise and avoid common errors, i.e. leadership versus management, handling distractions and mission creep
- Develop an understanding of the students' unions vision, mission, values and strategic plans
- Work with officers to develop their plans in synergy with the unions strategic and annual goals
- Introduce Officers to the Union's governing documents, as well as rationalising services and the purpose of key events as a means to a greater end!
- Establish a team contract, remits of power, how officers will be held accountable and hold each other to account
- Facilitate relationship building and expectations setting sessions, with union staff members
- Enable officers to realise the support that is available to them and establish their own resilience and coping methods
- Attendance at NUS' national training and networking events
Enable officers to recognise the importance of fostering strong relationships with key stakeholders, not least the membership and the institution but also externals

This is clearly a process and not something which can be ticked off through a one, two or five day block of time at the start of an officer's term. It is therefore important to establish a cycle for officer development which carefully allows for in timings, diversifying methods, repetition of concepts, time for practical application, the testing of ideas and finally reflection. With this in mind it's my view that the summer months for an officer should be a jigsaw of learning events combining planning and practical application which eases them into the first term and only technically transits

from 'induction' into 'ongoing development' after the fresher's chaos has died down and the academic year is underway.

"My approach is always that officer development shouldn't be a conclusive number of time slots, it's an ongoing process which can be managed through this cycle."

The realisation of the practicalities of being an Officer is often a steep climb until the October of a first term. From then until the end of the first term many officers experience fatigue, mission creep, the overwhelming email inbox, committee commitments and possible tensions in the team become magnified when Officers realise they have only have six working months to get everything done!

Officers often need the time to step out of their office, away from their messages to reassess, recognise their successes so far and fine tune their plans for the rest of their term in office.

An officer's ongoing development cycle should include:

- Appraisal opportunity
- Safe mechanisms for feedback and performance review
- Outcomes and Impacts Review Sessions
- Attendance at National events and participation in national networking opportunities
- Core skills enhancement and refresher training
- Perhaps, team contract review, refresher or conflict avoidance measures
- The opportunity to train and develop other Representatives, such as their Exec and Part time Officers
- An opportunity to reflect and recommend required training and development for successors

I am saying all of this not to teach you to suck eggs but to express my empathy and shared commitment to getting the best out of officers. In my work with unions I have also enjoyed watching the officer transition and 'journey', and with careful consideration of the annual cycle of officer induction and development I relish the prospect of facilitating more of that student movement magic!

'We haven't got the money to invest', I hear you cry! My response to this is, if you are considered in your approach it does not need to take huge investment or resource. I would love to hear from you, your ideas and challenges for enabling fantastic student representation and between us I am confident we will be able to implement timely and appropriate mechanisms through which your officers can flourish.

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