



# Being a Students' Union Officer



national union of students

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## Introduction

Exciting, vital and life changing – the role of a students' union officer is all of these things and more, but simple, straightforward and easy to explain? Not likely. The experience of being an officer will always be unique, both to that individual, but also because no other job quite like it exists. The challenges of being representative, activist and trustee, having to achieve so much in a year while still keeping a long term view and being placed in the middle of what for most is the largest organisation they will ever be a part of are all sizeable ones.

This guide is unusual from NUS as it gives very few answers or suggestions. Instead it is hoped to inform and guide officers, especially new ones about the role they have and the opportunities for change they should make the most of. It describes behaviours and skills you will need to employ; a short outline of how you might feel at different times of the year and where to get advice when you require it. We have also included comments from previous Sabbaticals sharing their experience and what they went on to do.

With your in house training, the officer development programme and the support from NUS and other students' union officers this guide will help you fight and win in your role, a role that for your students promises to be exciting, vital and life changing.



Richard 'Bubble' Budden  
VP Union Development

## Scope

The role of students' union officer, whether in Higher or Further Education, part-time or Sabbatical is an exciting and rewarding one. They are change makers, activists, supporters, developers, leaders, trustees and many more incarnations to do the best for the students in their institutions. It can therefore be a confusing position to be, in as officers must move from one set of actions and behaviours to another. As an elected, representative position is a rare entity for many people in society clarification also needs to be given as to the relationship with volunteers, professionals and external bodies. This guide will describe the habits and functions of successful officers and signpost where further help can be found in developing the relevant skills.

This resource should be used alongside NUS' in-house training which is offered free to NUS constituent members. Further skill development on particular roles is available within the Officer Development Programme and other online guides. Contact your first point of contact or [nusuk@nus.org.uk](mailto:nusuk@nus.org.uk) for more information.

## The four hats of Students' Union officers

As we noted above, officers can fulfil a number of roles – you could be representing a particular faculty of students at a institution board in the morning, meeting with course rep volunteers over lunch to thank them for their work and be working on a new building strategy in the afternoon. NUS have defined these different activities into four areas that officers find useful to describe their work.

- 1) The representative – being the “voice” of students
- 2) The activist – working for change and building student activism
- 3) The trustee – oversight of the union as an organisation
- 4) The minister or portfolio role – supporting a group of volunteers or activity

Each of these four hats requires distinct skills and behaviours. They require different approaches from officers and you will need to work with different groups of people. One of the biggest challenges will be when you must combine “hats” in the same meeting or even at the same time. Here we discuss each of these areas.

*Being an officer helped me consider what behaviours and skills I needed to use at different times. The 4 hats principle that NUS uses was really useful to me. Being able to think about how to approach situations in different ways has been vital for me later in employment and in life generally.*

Name: John Schless

Officer at: Leeds University Union 2005-6

Now: Working as a major Donor Fundraiser, National Autistic Society

## **Representative** – being the voice of students

The core role of a student officer is to be a representative of the student body. Examples of this will be giving a student point of view at institution meetings, talking on behalf of students living in a town or city at a local council meeting or writing a letter to the press about an issue that affects students. The purpose of representation is to bring about change and improvement not to monitor the status quo.

When students elect someone as an officer they expect them to take their views on board and give a fair representation of student feeling. One of the reasons that we have elected representatives, however, is that it is often easiest for one person, with appropriate consultation, to make an informed decision about an issue on behalf of many. Officer should learn to combine their leadership role with due diligence to listening to all students' opinions. The student population is, thankfully, becoming more diverse and officers will need to reflect this as they represent them.

Officers will need:

- Good communication skills with students
- Opportunities to go out and talk to students and listen to their concerns
- Proper structures that allow for student opinion to be known on key issues, e.g. student councils and referenda. Proper policy setting mechanisms should be in place
- Strong and informed democratic structures where students can see how their opinions are being fed into their elected representatives and how those officers make decisions
- A good understanding of the students at their institution – especially those who are marginalised or forgotten, including part time students, students with children and international students, though there are many more groups to consider
- Time and support to research information on the issues they are being asked about and analytical skills to use it
- An understanding about how to use their representative role to bring about change. Sometimes major changes can occur with a conversation with a institution official or local councillor
- The ability to understand the implications of decisions in meetings

## **The activist** – working for change and building student activism

Life as a student can be exciting, fulfilling and offer amazing opportunities. But it is never perfect. Student officers have a vital campaigning role in their unions to bring about change but an equally important one in empowering students as individuals to do the same. They could be organising a demonstration for longer library hours, petitioning for better social learning space or lobbying a local MP to vote on a fairer funding system.

Anyone with a desire to make a change can be an activist. Student officers should make sure that the opportunities exist for all students to be involved in campaigning and that they can access them easily. Leadership and organisation skills are important, as well as a strategic approach to getting the demands that students want. To make a real impact, officers should also make sure their campaigns are focused and there is coverage from local and student media.

Officers will need:

- Strong communication and organisation skills with students
- Structures that allow them to train and organise large numbers of students – most commonly communication action networks
- Mechanisms for students to choose the campaigns the union is working on, usually a student council
- The ability to enthuse students about an issue and inform them of the problems
- A knowledge of where the union has come from on key issues, where it wants to be in several years time and how its campaigning work will advance this goal
- Understanding of the boundaries of campaigning as a charity
- To develop a relationship with the Institution that allows them to campaign forcefully on issues and maintain communication on partnership projects
- Links with local and student media to promote their action and get maximum impact

## **The trustee** – oversight of the union as an organisation

The fact that officers are elected for a year at a time brings a fresh approach to many key areas of union work. Some of the biggest changes that can be made however are those that take longer; the development of volunteering and advice centres, protecting against financial risk so that future students can be represented and creating legal security in the face of governmental changes. Officers have a role in safeguarding the union as an organisation so it can survive for future generations of students to have support, activism and representation.

Trustees need to step back from their individual lives as students and officers and think broadly and deeply about the student body and the direction their organisation is travelling in. They will need to leave personal passions and interests aside as they concentrate on the organisation as a whole. The trustee board is usually responsible for supporting, developing and directing the general manager or chief executive and through them the union staff so this will require a very particular skill set. It is the Trustee Board as a collective that makes decisions and therefore officers need to keep that in mind.

Officers will need:

- Good understanding of the financial and legal implications that the union operates within
- The ability to consider these implications apart from any campaigning, representative or portfolio role you may have, as well as any personal interests
- Strategic planning skills
- Integrity and openness in decision making
- Clear understanding of the political and representative remits of different parts of the union
- Good communication skills with the other trustees
- Knowledge of the skills that other trustees bring to the board
- Desire to meet collective consensus on the decisions that the board makes



**The minister or portfolio role** – supporting a group of volunteers or activity

Most students' union officers have a clearly defined group of activities or students that they have responsibility for. This may be sports clubs and societies, welfare representatives in halls and the advice centre, course representatives and education casework or a specific demographic such as BME students or women. Activities could be helping organise a societies ball, running a welfare awareness week or training student media. These are sometimes referred to as an officer's constituency. The role of the officer as a developer and supporter comes in here as it is through these volunteers and projects that the officer can have an affect.

Officers will also need to interact effectively with their students, have good project planning skills and an understanding of which staff and resources are on hand to support these areas. NUS are also producing a guide to working with volunteers which is due in June 2009.

Officers will need:

- Project planning skills in terms of the individual projects but also how they will fit into the year's plans of campaigning and key events
- Ability to evaluate the success of current projects and data and think about where improvements are needed or actions that have been successful
- In depth resource management in terms of budgets but also the ability of volunteers and staff to fulfil the work that is being asked of them
- Good personal skills with those you are working with
- An understanding of how your project impacts on the workload of others in relation to other projects – for example how holding an awareness week just before elections will affect the work of membership services
- Time management and organisational skills to make sure projects are delivered appropriately

## Who to work with

Whatever hat you are wearing, you will need to work with different people to achieve your objectives – whether that’s a local trade union in a campaign, course representatives for a presentation to the institution or helping a student write a speech for a demonstration. This next section suggests some behaviours and considerations to keep in mind for different people.

### **Working with... yourself**

Officers often forget that as well as being a student leader they are a person and treat themselves in a fashion they would never treat a volunteer, staff member or another officer. There are plenty of examples of officers who don’t give themselves enough time off and so can’t deliver for their students properly, or take too much work on at anyone time. Officers are a fantastic resource for your students – look after yourself!

#### **10 tips for working with yourself**

1. Think carefully about your handover into the role and what you want to get out of it
2. Choose between 3 and 5 personal priorities for the year and make only those your ultimate “to do” list
3. Plan time off – normally at least 3 clear weeks throughout the year without any work (including checking emails) and 3-4 other days off
4. Watch how many hours you work each week, and be aware these may need to be flexible
5. Make a list of small things you enjoy – a TV programme you like, a friend you like to meet, a student society you enjoy and allocate time to do this
6. Turn off your mobile phone and email for a period each day
7. Almost all successful officers book an hour each day to evaluate what their priorities are what actions need to be taken. This will help reduce stress
8. Book 20% of your diary out as time to deal with emails and unforeseen events
9. Think early about your plans for once you finish being an officer and what actions you need to get you there – whether that’s a graduate placement, further study or employment
10. Do what you can to make your year as an officer meaningful and rewarding

## **Working with other officers**

NUS staff often help student officers with tensions. This is far more likely to be between a team of officers than between officers and union staff or even the officers and the institution. A student officer team working together is far greater than the sum of its parts and, as a team, you should develop an understanding of each other's skills, drives and working practices.

Officers are elected because they have passion for their students, they have vision of leadership and an opinion on what is wrong and what is right. Teams of officers are therefore made up of an entire group of these individuals, and at times the passion and the visions will clash. You will need to work with your fellow officers throughout the year and so deal with these issues in a calm and clear manner. The lobbying skills of an activist or intense feelings of a representative are less use than an honest and open discussion between you and your peers.

NUS' in house training will help you be prepared for these issues, and it's important not to get too worried about them, but create an agreement among your team as to how to approach any situations that arise.

## **Working with staff**

Students' union officers are often blessed with experienced staff teams who support them in their role and bring specialism and expertise to the operational areas of the union. Advice workers help with the portfolio aspect of the officer role, finance managers support the trustee aspect by preparing reports, membership services staff can help train activists and research issues that inform the prime representative role. In all aspects staff support the representative officers.

Generally staff should be providing one or more of the following functions:

- Providing a service function to your membership such as reception staff, shop assistants, cleaning staff, sports and societies administration, running your elections etc
- Providing a service function to you as elected officers such as providing an information base on the number of plagiarism cases the advice centre has dealt with, printing and distributing committee papers for the executive or council meetings etc
- Providing an organisational / internal service such as human resources staff or finance staff
- Managing the staff delivering either of the above and managing the activity of the departments those people work in.

As trustees, officers have a role in supporting, directing and developing union staff through the most senior employee – usually the general manager or chief executive. Trustees should make sure there is a robust appraisal system in place to help keep the union moving forwards in terms of its development and strategic aims. This will include setting key targets for the general manager and a review process for the progress on this work. A proper performance management system helps officers keep a track of union development and aids staff because it gives them a framework within which to carry out their job. The appraisal and performance management processes should generally be administered by Union staff or managers with the key information being shared with you as the trustees.

There will be points where officers will be asked to give opinions informally about the work that is going on, often by employees who do not have a senior role. This could include a campaigns staff member asking about a slogan or a designer asking for an opinion on a logo or brand. In these operational issues staff will

often have much expertise and officers should be aware of when they are asked for an informal opinion to guide work and when, as trustees, a serious staffing issue is asked of them.

Whilst most officers will have a friendly relationship with staff, volunteers and everyone in their organisation on a day to day level, they should treat any issues they have to deal with in terms of salary, performance, complaints or dismissal with confidentiality, respect and due diligence. NUS staff members are able to advise on these issues and can do so without specific details being given to them. If you need any help considering a staffing matter you can contact your regional organiser for information, advice or support.

*The best thing about being an officer was changing the sense of the student's union from just being a couple of bars, with a shop and a number of events into a movement for change based on students' views and concerns. The union building represented a gathering place rather than being the union, as every student was part of what made the union important. Casting a light onto what the union was, how it operated and how students could influence its activities.*

Name: Jules Mason

Officer at: Southampton Solent 1997-99

Now: Head of Governance Support, British Red Cross

## **Working with students**

One of the areas that officers find most difficult is, surprisingly, working with students. Union officers are leaders who should seek to develop students by nurturing their passion, activism and interests. There is a danger that some unions become not 'by students, for students' but 'by officers, for students'. Officers should always ask themselves if students would benefit from being part of the work they are doing. Officers painting banners for a protest, sitting behind a society fair stall and dominating the speeches in a union council are actions that should often be done by students. Officers should understand the difference between taking a political leadership role and taking opportunities away from students.

One of the most common manifesto pledges from student officers is to make the union more accessible, more open and more relevant to 'everyday' students. Good communication between officers and students is important, and one of the best things that officer teams can do is set up a programme of G.O.A.T.S (go out and talk to students) and G.O.A.L.S. (go out and *listen* to students). If a team of 6 officers each talked to 10 different students a week for 20 weeks they would have face to face contact with almost 250 students in addition to those they talk to during their everyday working.

Volunteers are often the lifeblood of students' union work. Student media, societies and sports committees and course representatives all rely on volunteers to keep them running. NUS is producing a set of resources on supporting volunteers soon to be available on our website. One of the key principles to remember is that all volunteers need to be:

- Recruited
- Trained
- Supported
- Thanked

You should make sure this is the experience of all volunteers throughout the time they help within the union.

## **Working with the partner Institution**

The relationship between the students' union and the partner institution is an incredibly interesting one. Students' unions are in the most part reliant on their partner university or college for funding and support and the '94 Education Act enshrines a regulatory role for institutions in terms of finance and democratic process of students' unions. Equally students' unions are there to represent the views of their members and so should never be scared of telling the institution where it has done wrong or needs to improve. This situation requires an important working relationship.

There will be points where the students' union will need to actively fight for their students against their institution on issues. This could include demonstrations for course closures, supporting lecturer trades-union or offering support to a particular individual. A strong campaign is organised and focused, and students' unions should make sure that their message against an injustice decision does not become undirected aggression against the institution as a whole and therefore damage the overall partnership work between the two organisations.

Often officers can win for students in a variety of less direct ways. Plenty of decisions that affect students have been made in the corridors after an institution meeting or at an event. Officers should look for all opportunities to lobby their counterparts in the university or college, be that at the end of year awards or processing in a graduation ceremony.

Students' unions and institutions are complex organisations with many different areas to them. In the relationship between them, officers must make sure it is fighting against the institution where it needs to, promoting and supporting it where it is appropriate and working together when it is in the best interests of current and future students.

## The Officer Year

Every officer will have a different experience, and it is impossible to know what will come up in the time ahead. You may be called to respond to news stories, unexpected strikes or a change in local government. That said, we can divide the year into four sections that are relatively similar from one officer term to the next to help you prepare for the flow.

### **Summer to autumn**

The summer months are where officer teams learn about their roles, plan the year ahead and learn to work together.

Officers should: Take time to plan and train, get to know each other and rest ready for the first term.

### **Autumn to winter**

The first section of the academic year is the busiest and where most campaigning work takes place. After the excitement of welcome week, officers often find themselves in the middle of their manifesto projects and activist work. Volunteers need training and first years need inducting.

Officers should: Support each other in this busy period, ensure they take some time off and work as a team throughout.

### **Winter to spring**

The election season brings challenges for officers. It can move students' focus anyway from campaigns and projects and can be difficult for officer teams who lose focus leading to a build up in tension.

Officers should: Make sure they are talking through issues with each other, that elections are enjoyable and exciting for all and that campaigns from autumn are followed up.

### **Spring to summer**

This term is full of summer events and parties as well as exams. It's a good time to be lobbying the institution, preparing new officers and recruiting new officers for the year ahead. On a personal note, officers should prepare themselves for what's next for them.

Officers should: Tie up loose ends from campaigning, support elects with a solid and well prepared handover and create plans for themselves after they finish their term of office.



## Dealing with issues between officers

NUS hope that your year as an officer is always enjoyable, always productive and always without conflict. This might not be the case however and there are a few things you should try and do to deal with this conflict.

1. Stay calm.
2. If you can, talk to the person the conflict is with explaining what you believe the problem is. Be honest and as open as you can be while feeling safe.
3. Listen to their point of view, without interrupting them.
4. Try and come to a mutual understanding and agree on a way forwards.
5. If this doesn't work you may want to seek advice from elsewhere on resolving the issue. This could be another officer or your NUS first point of contact.

It is recommended before you start your officer year that you agree as a team how to deal with tension that arises so that you can be prepared. Agreeing this when you aren't tired or in the middle of a situation is better than trying to set a structure later.

## Other issues

Your NUS first point of contact will be able to make a termly visit to your union to help you plan and reflect. You should also contact them if you have any other issues and they will be able to help or direct you to more information.

*Of all my experiences, being a students' union officer did the most to make me who I am today. I did so much in just one year and learnt so many new skills. I was a leader, a representative, a campaigner; dealing with staff and creating new projects such as a landlord accreditation scheme that is still in place today. I've been a human rights barrister and chair of an immigration support charity, but I was particularly lucky to be an officer - it is such a great opportunity.*

Sinead O'Rourke

Officer at: University of Nottingham

Now: Treasury Solicitor