# Officer Experience Project: A qualitative exploration into the experience of full-time Officers at UoNSU

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# 1. Abstract

In the world of students 'unions, Officers hold a prominent role in the representation and leadership of the student population and the organisation itself. There has been very little exploration into the experiences of full-time Officers, but through first-hand experience, Madeleine Fox (Union Development Officer 2020-2021) understood that the role of a full-time representative at the University of Nottingham Students 'Union (UoNSU) is that of a unique one. As a result, this piece of research was commissioned to help others better understand the: role and responsibilities, experiences, and needs of full-time Officers at UoNSU. To ensure that situational, organisational and individualistic factors were controlled for and explored, a qualitative methodology was employed, sampling from both current and former Officer cohorts. A series of semi-structured interviews and diary tasks were conducted and analysed utilising a thematic analysis framework.

The purpose of an Officer remains unique to their role, and though leadership and representation are at the core of being a public figure such as this, the way in which these concepts manifest themselves is not only dependent upon the role itself, but how that role will be utilised to achieve personalised objectives. Adaptability runs through the role and responsibilities of an Officer, which is also true of their communicative style (e.g. tone, methods and content). What we saw was that, while the opportunity to become an Officer had catapulted their personal and professional development, the role itself was challenging. From workload and accountability structures, to conflict and disconnected support, our Officers spoke of their experiences and explored how it had impacted on their sense of wellbeing. As well as this, discussion surrounding the Union's support structures helped to identify core expectations relating to the volume, appropriateness, and accessibility of support: which were sometimes amiss.

Following the results section, a series of conclusions and recommendations are presented which call upon the Union to explore opportunities for change and improvement. It is expected that this will go towards supporting our current and future Officers with their transition into, and time in their role.

# 2. Introduction

Across the years, the University of Nottingham Students 'Union has been no stranger to change. With alterations being made to its membership platform, staff and representative structures, and the strategic focus itself, change might seem like the only constant for some working at the Union. Understandably, the organisation has taken a lot of time in perfecting its role in student representation, ensuring that any changes made are informed and appropriate. Work by Nichols (2019) sought to examine how our democratic structures and processes within the organisation were perceived by our members. Findings indicated that there was some frustration, not with the roles and processes themselves, but with the way in which the SU facilitates and communicates these structures and values. And with that, the importance of coming to a shared understanding of what democracy and student leadership mean.

Now that the Union's period of change is beginning to settle, we must use this time to understand whether our representatives feel able and empowered to communicate and demonstrate such information: and do amazing things for our students. In doing so, we seek to ensure that our Officers are best supported, understood, and are a central part of this new era of UoNSU.

Established research on the experience of full-time Officers within students 'unions is relatively scarce: meaning that we are unable to draw on external sources of data throughout the sector to build such understanding. What we do have available to us though, highlights challenges associated with being a full-time Officer. Whether that be the pressures of being a public figure, relationships and communication with SU staff, the governance of the roles themselves, or the subsequent transition into the 'normal 'working world, it is clear that our understanding and

support for Officer teams can sometimes be unsatisfactory (Adedapo, 2019; Coole, 2021; Smith, 2020; Gainsbrorough & Binnie, 2019).

However by looking into social and occupational psychology research, we can begin to build expectations surrounding what the experiences of these Officers might be, taking into account the context surrounding them. Seminal work has not only identified how we develop our self-concept and determine our own abilities and successes from our membership in groups, but has also allowed us to understand the process of group formation itself (Tajfel et al., 1979; Festinger, 1954; Tuckman, 1965). Tuckman (1965) explores four stages of group formation: forming, storming, norming and performing. This model generates understanding of how we can enable a group of strangers to perform exceptionally, and has been used widely throughout organisations, including UoNSU. As such, research in this field has allowed us to identify the different facets of groups, including what might be optimal and detrimental to the individual and their performance (De Drue & Weingart, 2003).

As well as this, we see a plethora of established models that have been developed to support groups or teams in an organisational setting. For instance, the engaging for success report (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009) identified four core enablers in optimising employee engagement, which included: strategic narrative, engaging managers, listening to employee voice, and organisational integrity. While there are many different approaches to optimising the product of a team available to professionals, each one can be used as a basis for understanding our own environment and team experiences.

Though there is little evidence in the way of research on Officer teams, making comparisons across the sector can only take our knowledge and understanding so far. The history, environment, and structure of an Officer team can be so vast from one organisation to another, that doing so would come with its own implications. It is for these reasons that UoNSU aim to explore the experience of our full-time Officers, both current and former. With the aim of addressing our journey as a Union, where we are currently, and where we might need to be for our future Officer teams. Therefore, our goal was to explore the following research questions:

1. What are the main responsibilities of an Officer at UoNSU?

2. How do Officers understand their leadership and representative duty?

3. How do Officers typically interact with Union and University staff, and how does that differ from students?

4. How do the experiences of current Officers differ to those previously in position?

5. How would Officers describe their wellbeing during their time in role, and what support is expected?

# 3. Methodology

## 3.1 Sample

Nine participants were selected from those who had been in position as a UoNSU full-time Officer in the past four years (since the 2017 intake). Participation was voluntary using a Microsoft Forms sign-up which was distributed via email and LinkedIn's chat function. Current Officers and former Officers[1] were assigned to two distinct groups, with those previously in position being informally weighted by role name, year in position and time in role to ensure a representative sample. A full breakdown of this information will not be provided at this time as to protect anonymity.

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[1] Current Officer will refer to any Officer in a full-time position at the 2020 intake. Former Officer will refer to any Officer whose last year in position was at any time before that.

## 3.2 Data collection

### *1:1 interviews*

Both cohorts within the sample were invited to a 1:1 interview, each lasting between 45 and 70 minutes long. These interviews utilised a semi-structured approach and were held using video call software. As little is known about the experience of Officers, this type of approach allowed a detailed insight from the perspective of the participant themselves – and for the exploration of topics that might not have been considered by the researcher. While some element of freedom was needed to achieve this, it was important that the protocols not become entirely unstructured as to make comparisons between the two cohorts (former and current Officers) difficult. As well as utilising a question guide to aid discussion (appendix 8.1), all participants were involved in a short task during their interviews. They were required to read through a list of descriptive words relating to job roles and responsibilities (appendix 8.2), and discuss those that best related to the role that they held. Results of this task will be discussed further in the report.

All interviews were recorded using Teams 'or Zoom's built in recording functionality, being transcribed by the researcher using an auto-transcription app 'Otter'.

### *Diary task*

Current Officers alone, were required to also take part in a diary entry task completed across two distinct weeks. This aimed to explore their working activities and provide contextual understanding where needed. While diary entries are most prominent in the field of medical research, their use has been utilised to great strength in social research settings also. Alaszewski (2006, p.2) defines a diary as a "regular, personal and contemporaneous record". Diaries can not only be used to observe behaviour and the experiences of individuals, but how they might also interpret situations and attribute meaning to them.

Diaries are typically effortful to use as a methodology, for both the researcher and the participant. By designing the task in a two-phase approach (with the first week running at the start of one month, and the second running the month after), it allowed the physical demand on the participant to be alleviated somewhat. And while there was some drop-off in engagement towards the end of both phases, an average of 85% completion across the two distinct weeks was achieved.

This part of the data collection utilised a naturalistic approach, in that participants were given the freedom to explore topics in whichever way they saw most appropriate. To ensure that they had a good starting point, all participants attended an information session. This addressed the aim of the task, any logistical information e.g. timings or length, as well as time for the participants to ask any further questions. Controlling for the potential weaknesses of such a method, allowed us to utilise the diary task as a flexible design which helped mitigate recall issues. And while diarists were left to fill in their diary with little interference from the research team, time stamps and participant-provided 'date of entry 'helped to monitor compliance.

## 3.3 Coding and analysis

Following collection and transcription phases, the research team began coding and analysing the data collected from both the interviews and diaries. Theme formation was guided by the principles of thematic analysis (TA), an approach that is flexible in exploring the reality of individuals and therefore compatible with naturalistic and semi-structured methods (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Using Nvivo, a qualitative data analysis software, codes were assigned to transcripts and revisited recursively to ensure best fit and encourage theme generation. Again, as little is known in this area, an inductive approach to analysis was employed: with themes and theory being the outcome of the research conducted.

## 3.4 Ethical considerations

With researching the experiences of current and former employees of UoNSU, there undoubtedly comes some concern in relation to anonymity protection. Participants are in or have been in a

position not only known to employees of the SU and University, but the student population also. As well as this, qualitative samples are typically smaller than in quantitative research, and when recruiting from an already limited population and addressing colleague relations and workload, identification had the potential to increase exponentially. To help mitigate these risks, a series of recommendations were proposed and put forward to key stakeholders. It was important that the research design ensure:

- The name and role title of any participant be excluded. Participant numbers have been used for administrative ease but will not accompany verbatim quotations as to protect the identity of those who have completed a diary entry and are currently in position: as making links with other quotations from the same participant might lead to identification.

- Specific details and narrative relating to a participant's workload, interaction with other staff members, and working activities more generally that might identify the participant have been redacted or omitted. As well as this, if the context of narrative could lead to identification or misidentification in any circumstance, the verbatim quote will not be used.

- Data is appropriately collected, processed and stored: including both research data and sign-up form information e.g. contact details.

- Any recorded data will have been stored securely, and transcribed data will be anonymised.

Participants were provided with an information sheet outlining the nature, design and potential risks associated with taking part in the study. Informed consent was given via a digital document, and participants were reminded verbally that their participation was voluntary and of their right to withdraw if they so wished. With the participant and interviewer having worked in the same organisation, it was also of priority to ensure that they were aware of the interviewer's duty to work in accordance with the standards of the Market Research Society. With this, care was taken to ensure that semi-structured questions did not become leading or priming in any way throughout the design phase.

# 4. Findings and discussion

## 4.1 Defining Officer roles and responsibilities

The role of an Officer was thought to be relatively misunderstood by both students and staff. The ways in which Officers took to defining their role not only helped to contextualise what type of work has been their focus and how they have achieved that, but also how they understand their duty and responsibility as an Officer more generally. When completing the interview task, a clear preference for the terms 'representative 'and 'leader 'emerged for both current and former Officers: the importance and conceptualisation of these terms will be discussed shortly. Aside from this though, participants took the time to explain additional responsibilities that were core to their working life. Alternative interpretations of their role were themed and included:

- The relationship facilitator. Communicating and liaising with important stakeholders, working collaboratively with others to ensure project success: particularly managing the partnership between the Union and University.

- The catalyst for change. Influencing others to make positive change, and being involved in key decision-making processes.

- The expert. Being an expert in student experience at UoN and providing support and guidance to others on their knowledge/expertise where needed.

- The advisor[2]. Supporting others to see the best way forward and work most effectively, whether that be through operational, strategic or personal matters.

Not all Officers felt they demonstrated these responsibilities, and it is unlikely that these would all be shown at any one time. Instead, these were interchangeable to the situation at hand, with some being a more permanent feature of a particular role itself.

**Representation**

While it might feel almost obvious that the Officer team act in a way that is representative, it is important that we understand how they attribute meaning to this responsibility. All but one participant saw representation as a key part of their role within the Union, explaining how they would use the concerns of the student population to influence positive change. Whether it be the Union, University or with external organisations, the Officers see themselves as a representative of student voice and experience, fighting for the needs and what is right for our members. Not just being present at the decision-making table, but characteristically acting in a way that supports students. While there might be instances where they are required to act in a way that reflects the specific role they hold (e.g. representing sports teams or those in postgraduate study), most understand their duty as a representative for all students at UoN.

> *"I think that's a key part of what we do, is representing students' needs and wants to different stakeholders, whether that be the SU, whether that be taking them to the uni."*

This in itself though, highlighted challenges with the way in which the duty of a representative was defined, or not defined for that matter. Having held an alternative representative role throughout their studies, one participant had expected that their role as an Officer would involve them directly speaking with students. Instead, representation had taken on another form in that they used data and project work to achieve this duty, more so than anecdotal evidence. In the minds of UoNSU Officers, representation is multifaceted: which can ultimately lead to confused or mismatched expectations.

> *"…representational through data, like data led approaches, instead of anecdotally through students, which is what my [previous representational role] was. So I think I struggled at the start to understand my role."*

As well as this, participants made a clear distinction that they are also employed to act as a representative for the Union itself. Instances such as these were often seen as political in nature, being the spokesperson for the SU on external and internal matters that might influence the lives of our members, and the organisation itself. This was especially true for those who had worked on collaborative projects with external organisations, charities, or individuals.

**Leadership**

Conceptually, leadership was more straightforward in the minds of Officers. To our participants, not only was being a leader about working alongside senior staff members, but also informing the direction of the Union: acting as the focal point for students and staff alike, to understand and see demonstrated union activity and success.

> *"We are leaders of the students' union and Officers are part of the leadership team, and lead the union, and lead the activities of the union and what kind of drives it."*

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[2] This was only applicable to those who had taken on a supervisory role for other Officers during their time.

Though organisational leadership was perceived as a key responsibility of theirs, some also explored the importance of being a leader in their own right. In times where they would be managing student groups or working particularly close with other staff, their leadership duty was almost supervisory in nature. Some examples of how this might manifest itself included: the prioritisation and allocation of work, bringing relevant stakeholders or colleagues into a project where necessary, advising on idea formation, and leading meetings or group activity.

> *"So I'd say leader is quite important. And that's definitely one of them, just in the sense of you're a leader of the SU, but also I was a leader within the different groups that I worked with... I gave them a lot of support and help and they looked to me for certain things"*

By the very nature of their role within the Union, Officers will fundamentally be leaders of the organisation. But the way in which leadership manifests itself at an individual level is ultimately dependent upon their responsibilities and role type.

**Adaptability of the role**

Throughout these conversations, what was seen is that the role of an SU representative and leader is adaptable in nature: based on what different stakeholders might need of the Officer in that moment, as well as who the individual might want to be within that role and what work they intend to prioritise. In fact, a couple of participants made a clear distinction in their selection of role descriptors during the task, between what they believe to be the purpose of their role and how their focus will have shaped that. For the majority of participants, this was something that in fact motivated them to become an Officer at UoNSU in the first place, with one participant explaining:

> *"I suppose the thing that appealed to me is the flexibility to make the role what you want and kind of be driven by your particular interests and be able to push in certain areas"*

It was relatively unsurprising that participants addressed a breadth of responsibilities that are central to the role of an Officer, as seen above. And ultimately, no matter how defined or bound a role might seem by its title, participants recognise that the role of an Officer is that of a holistic one. While this can work positively, and allows flexibility in approach, it can also muddy the waters and create a lack of clarity in understanding work boundaries and remits, influential power, and the role purpose altogether: for both the Officer team and those working alongside them. And with the introduction of newly defined positions in the Officer team structure this past year, alongside the coronavirus pandemic shifting the nature and prioritisation of work, participants highlighted how difficult and time consuming trying to navigate this vagueness can be.

> *"I think like this year, more than ever, the role has [changed], I think COVID has really shifted how all of the Officers work, generally."*

> *"...because the union development role was new and we didn't really know how it was working like whether it was going to function as the President still"*

Though the Union already employ generic profiles for the Officer positions as part of their contract, it might be of benefit to utilise this information to develop individual role profiles as they have the capacity to be so different from one another, while still ensuring that they remain flexible enough to allow incoming candidates to utilise them how they wish. This will help to address the current gap in understanding the work responsibilities and roles more generally, for both staff and Officers.

## 4.2 Workload and work tasks
### Administrative duties

Though not a single participant referenced their position as Officer in an administrative sense within the interview exercise, nearly all took the time to explain how prominent and challenging such tasks had been for them. To our sample, administrative tasks concerned the following: reading and replying to emails, completing meeting preparation, as well as organising and attending meetings. The volume of emails and meetings were somewhat overwhelming for our Officers: especially so for those who had taken flexi or booked annual leave. In the diary task, we saw that on their return, there was a narrative of chasing emails and falling behind. Even towards the end of the week, our participants still referenced how they had been unable to catch up on this type of work and how stress-inducing this was for them.

> *"I have really struggled to stay on top of my emails/admin this week after having a day off and then having meetings pretty much back to back every day, so decided to block out some time on Monday to properly go through and catch up on things!*
>
> *I again tried to go through a few more emails and managed to get them down to 76. I have found it very stressful this week to try and stay on top of normal admin like emails when running [a large project]"*

For some of our participants, the volume of emails were felt to be particularly problematic when faced with back to back meetings. They reflected feeling like there were not enough hours in the day to combat these work tasks, which would mean multitasking: again, only exacerbated when taking time out of work.

> *"When I took annual leave, I'd come back to over 150 emails so I'm catching up. I'm catching up and it will take me years to get through that many emails, while going to our normal meetings, which I never have a day… like I find it baffling when other Officers say they have a day of no meetings. There's not a day in my week, that I've had all year, with no meetings, there's not one day. And that means you don't have any time to catch up on admin, you do just have to do it at the same time."*

While participants understand the importance of completing work such as this, these administrative tasks can often feel unproductive, contributing significantly to the feeling of an unmanageable workload. One participant reflected in their diary that completing non-substantial tasks such as these would make them feel as though they were not achieving a lot in their role, as excessive time replying to emails or sat in meetings would feel like time away from impactful work relating to their manifesto and objectives. And where Officers had oversubscribed themselves with work to help others out, these feelings were only worsened.

It is not understood why there is such disparity between the little value that participants place on administrative tasks in their role responsibilities, and the large amount of time spent working in this way. What we can see though, is a call for alternative workload support structures that help to promote shared responsibility (as to not oversubscribe Officers) and manage administrative tasks in a smarter way.

**Work-life balance**

As we have just seen, work tasks can become quite unmanageable for Officers relatively quickly. Because of this, workload often becomes inseparable from their time away from work: whether that be through compromising lunch breaks, evenings or weekends. One participant addressed feeling like they had little time to complete work that was expected of them to succeed in their position, and so they typically completed this in their own time.

> *"When are you going to work on your manifesto? And your manifesto is what you're being scrutinised on, and your role is there for the students so if you don't*

*do your manifesto, you're a bad Officer technically. So it just meant that often times, if there are events going on, obviously, you'd have to do it in the evenings or the weekends"*

Though the role of a representative might be to sacrifice times such as these to attend events, see to urgent matters, or to power forward to a deadline, a couple of former Officers spoke about how working in this way became their normality. And we saw above, how this had implications on taking annual leave: feeling that they had too much work on to do so, or would let someone down if they did. One Officer helped to elaborate on this, speaking about how they did not feel confident in taking formal time out of work, not simply because of the increased workload they would return to, but also because they saw very little others (including their line manager) do so.

More than anything, it raises the question of whether it is most appropriate for those in the Union Development role (formerly the President) to be in charge of annual leave authorisation, and indeed mitigating instances where other Officers are regularly accruing an exceptional amount of flexi-time. As it sets a precedent if they, themselves, are working overtime or not taking leave, as others might want or need to. While there is some recognition that it is their personal responsibility to take time out, they expect to be more supported and encouraged to do so: to be aware of and protect the negative effects it might have on their wellbeing.

> *"I forgot to have lunch because I threw myself into my afternoon meetings. At the moment the days are flying by I don't know where they are going and this is a less busy week than it usually is. No idea where all the time is going and I'm trying to manage relationships with different stakeholders. It's tough and it feels like there is not enough time in the working day. Just getting through it"*

As well as this, participants from the past two years spoke about the impact of home-working (as a result of the pandemic) and how this has worsened the work-life balance for some. Being out of the office had meant that the physical reminder that the end of the working day had come around was not there anymore, making it easy to work into the evening. Yet for one participant, working from home had encouraged them to be stricter in defining those boundaries than they had been beforehand, ensuring that they kept a healthy distinction between the two. While the effects of the pandemic have impacted the ability and need for time off in a very different way to before, the difficulty in achieving those healthy boundaries has persisted throughout the years: with Officers recognising the importance and need for support surrounding this.

## 4.3 Interpersonal relationships and communication

The quality of relationships and communication were felt to be essential to the success of an Officer during their time in position. And of course, it is undeniable that the pandemic has significantly impacted on the ability to form and deepen working relationships, as well as the efficacy of communication itself. Without normal opportunities for informal conversation, as a result of remote working, developing rapport with other Officers and staff members has taken a considerable amount of time: compared with what they might expect in a typical year. And though working remotely had increased the perceived presence of other employees, instances of misunderstanding, mismatched tone, and transactional conversation had been felt to be somewhat problematic. But an important distinction to make here, is that as similar trends (both positive and more negative) persist across the years, we can assume that the pandemic is not the leading factor in the efficacy of relationships and communication at UoNSU.

**Communicative tone**

As seen through defining Officer responsibilities, these individuals often juggle multiple relationships with various types of audiences: all of relatively high importance to their role and possibly even their success within that role. Exploring the methods, tone, and context of

communication helped to establish that, as with role responsibilities, there is a level of flexibility in the way in which Officers communicate.

When concerning staff relations, it is clear that familiarity, transparency and shared agenda all have large roles to play in how well-established a working relationship is: and thus, the formality and perceived efficacy of that communication. When making comparisons between the Union and University, participants recognise a higher level of professionalism in communicative tone when working with UoN than with the SU. This was not necessarily problematic in the eyes of our participants, but instead highlighted that those with further proximity from the Officers 'workload, interests, and Union activity in general will likely be more formal in their communication.

> *"How I interact with union staff compared to university staff, I'd say that with union staff I have a more personable approach, maybe. I feel like because we work in the same organisation we have this same sort of commonality about us. And I'd say that it's easier to find shared grounds, and I think how I work with union staff is probably, I say that I'm quite good at being personable, so I think that comes across well when I work with staff and they're more likely to want to work with me and do this and do that."*

> *"I've got a [teams] chat with me and then team members of career staff at the union, and I'll literally just send a message with like my thoughts, feelings like a ramble. But when I speak to the university, I'd never Teams message them...it's an email, I get people to check it over if it's an important one. There's very much a tone shift"*

And with students, this differs again. Participants feel that they are actively more empathetic and show more personality when communicating with students, as to help establish approachability. Yet, an important distinction to make here is that tone is likely determined by context and methods more so than the audience themselves: with students often needing timely support with a personal issue, and using social media or an email to do so. In these instances, it was important to our Officers that they come across as welcoming and relatable, and while balancing this with professionalism could sometimes be tricky, it was something they felt they generally did well.

> *"So, I think I'm definitely more myself when I speak to SU career staff and students. But you sort of still have that like professional like signposted SU tone, when you speak to students... less professional more approachable."*

> *"But I'd say I'm more professional around students because I want them to be impressed by the SU and have that confidence and trust that when they go to the SU, there's things that get done."*

**Balancing relationships and perspectives**

For some Officer positions, their role and workload tend to sit firmly in the middle of two organisations, and for these individuals, that can bring the challenge of navigating perspectives, motives, and needs that were often polar opposites of each other: while also trying to secure positive outcomes for students. For instance, two participants discussed how they would regularly be required to repeat messages and meetings between parties, which quickly became tiring and demotivating. Even for those with workloads that were less fixed between the Union and University, managing the perception of both organisations could often feel like a barrier to their progress.

Aside from managing the partnership between the Union and the University, some participants talked about the difficulty that comes with balancing the needs of the organisation with the needs of the student. One Officer spoke in detail about this, having working closely with senior managers during their time, and addressed how organisational changes had only worsened situations such

as this. Understanding and navigating this relationship within their role, did in turn, become an experience they learned from and valued. But was an aspect that they did not expect to be so integral to their role at the time.

> "There was a lot of drama in terms of not doing what the students want, versus balancing the books. So it's quite a tricky situation to be in."

> "You understand where the client's coming from, but you're balancing the client wants with the student wants."

In fact, some Officers spoke about balancing relationships as something they were proud of achieving during their time: as doing so had meant they had left their position with valuable professional contacts, and long-lasting support networks.

**Conflict**

When considering communication and relationships in a work setting, it might be expected that there will be some breakdown in the efficacy of those along the way, such as the 'storming 'phase outlined in Tuckman's (1965) model. What was surprising in this sample, is how prevalent and persistent conflict has been for Officers over the four years observed. Interestingly, current Officers attributed any conflict they had experienced to the lack of team building provisions available to them at the start of the year. However, as instances of conflict and relationship breakdown appear to be recurring, we can assume that there is more to this than the impact of the pandemic and remote working: and instead that this has only exacerbated these issues. For the most part, conflict seemed to be associated with an absence of communication, misunderstanding and working cross purposes.

For some participants in previous years, conflict within the Officer team had become so unbearable that they had removed themselves from the situation entirely, and working from another space became a welcomed break. Where conflict resolution steps had been taken, no matter how formal the intervention, the positive effect of this was undeniable. But, as well as not being versed in managing conflict themselves, participants also recognised that there was no member of staff available to manage these situations. Because of this, conflict often persisted beyond repair, and, as outlined by De Drue and Weingart (2003), conflict has strong negative correlations with team performance and team satisfaction. Therefore, if we allow conflict to persist, we are likely to see long-lasting effects on the quality of work, relationships and wellbeing of our Officer team more generally. One Officer explains:

> "I think probably people should have recognised what was happening and then taken steps to mitigate it, particularly in terms of the team dynamic. People just said well 'let them get on with it, you know, it's just part of being an Officer' but actually it affected the whole organisation, the dynamic of the team, I don't think at that point it was a nice place to work with this going on. So, I think people should, senior people should have recognised it and kind of stepped in. We did have a conflict session that seemed to help, but I think there was still the underlying issues there and it was never really the same, I would say that we never really worked collaboratively, as a team, from [that] point again to be honest."

This year alone, Officers have spoken about how group sessions, aimed at managing and intercepting instances like this have been beneficial, and is something that they would like to see continued or made available for all future Officer teams. And while these efforts have been useful, participants would like to see proactive approaches to team building support, training and spaces which help to address instances of conflict and appropriate ways of resolving them.

## 4.4 The identity of an Officer

Throughout discussions with current and former Officers, we saw some exploration into what it meant to be an Officer and the challenges that have come with that. Even within the interview task, they made clear distinctions with who they were as a person and how that fit (or did not fit) with the perceived expectations of the role itself. However, having their successes built around what they campaigned for as a student and being scrutinised on that as an Officer, sometimes made it hard to distinguish their individual and professional identity. So how exactly do our Officers understand this identity, and what areas of support are needed?

**Being a public figure and criticism**

As we have identified, Officers are inherently political figures within the Students 'Union: acting on matters internal and external to the organisation. But our support for them as political figures is felt to be quite low. And with being identifiable to not only staff and students, but externals alike, comes a level of scrutiny. The significance that the role of criticism played in their identity as an Officer, was unexpected and challenging to a number of our participants. For some, it was the reason for why the distinction between their personal and professional identity had been blurred: negatively impacting on their wellbeing and perceived ability to succeed in their role.

> *"There's a lot that's come at us and I suppose because we're the most forward facing people of the organisation, a lot of the brunt of that then comes on us and it's very easy to take personally"*

> *"There was a lot of stuff on [social media], and that massively impacted my wellbeing and even wanting to be in the role"*

While it was an accepted part of being an Officer, scrutiny had been felt more personally where it had originated from a source outside of the professional accountability structures in place to do so. A good example of this, particularly for current Officers, was where students had used anonymous social media pages to comment negatively on the work of the Officer team. Being in a role where their perceived duty is to do right by students, only exacerbates the difficulty of hearing any dissatisfaction with their actions.

Nevertheless, some participants talked about this acting as a significant learning curve for them, taking it upon themselves to change the way in which they heard criticism and worked alongside it. Understandably, these instances are difficult to manage from the perspective of the Union, but do further highlight the importance of providing nuanced training that speaks to the role of being a public figure, and its associated challenges: as to ensure that their perceived responsibility does not become dysfunctional, internalised pressure.

> *"It was really difficult to get over that everyone's watching what you're doing and people kind of want you to trip up. And I think that really impacted on my standard of work, just because I don't think I had the confidence and the necessary support or training to actually be set up to do well in that role. Which I think definitely showed like throughout my year."*

**Success and social comparison**

The role of comparison in the identity and working lives of Officers appears central in their perception of success. Officers tended to compare themselves to others in their team, as well as to those who ran before them: holding themselves to a high standard of success very early on.

> *"You hold yourself to a standard of previous Officer teams and you think about all the good things that they did. And you're like, 'I want to do all of those good things' and then there's just so many more barriers."*

This is in line with the premise of social comparison theory (Festinger, 1954) in which individuals evaluate their own attitudes and abilities in comparison with others, to determine and contextualise their level of success. By comparing upwards (with those who we deem better than us), we learn how to develop and better ourselves, and by comparing downwards, we feel better about our abilities. For our sample, what we see is that upwards social comparison has become somewhat problematic, and has led to an unhealthy level of self-pressurisation. Though we have addressed that a good work-life balance can be somewhat difficult to achieve for Officers across the years, two participants spoke about how competitive this act of comparison had become for them and the damaging effects associated with that.

> *"For some reason, it's almost like a challenge as an Officer that you don't have boundaries and it's like who can build up the most flexi and work the most hours, and who's at the most events? It's so unhealthy."*

> *"It became this badge of honour, like 'I'm having an awful time, but look at me like I'm an Officer'."*

It is almost as though an unhealthy work-life balance become ingrained into their identity as an Officer, facilitated by social comparison. As well as this, these behaviours appear somewhat reinforced by the accountability structures that we have in place. There was a clear pressure for our participants to achieve big and demonstrate 'Officer wins'. The term 'Officer win 'was one that arose across nearly all transcripts in some way, and while it might seem somewhat superficial, the conversation surrounding it indicated a pressure of accountability that we did not see elsewhere. While the premise of a win is positive, being driven by huge successes in an environment that does not always require or have the ability to facilitate those can become quite demotivating. One participant talked about this in great detail with reference to their role. With very little tangible outcomes as part of their work, it was easy for them to think that they were not achieving anything: when in reality their responsibility had been to make incremental changes towards improvements, to maintain the good, and prevent the bad.

In fact, Officers explained themselves that using language like this can feel dividing from not only others in the team, but the organisation itself: making the ability to compare their successes so much easier. In other words, by using language such as this and having their success evaluated in the way that it currently is, it seems to be reinforcing a narrative that having individual, large-scale wins is what it means to be an Officer. Instead, is it time that we re-evaluate what success looks like for our student representatives and how it is evaluated? As to prevent detrimental social comparison and perceptions of failure.

> *"I did all of my manifesto points, I did all of my objectives, I did a lot on policy. Lots of uni and SU staff members were quite pleased with what I was able to achieve during my year, but then they didn't see the flip side of that which is working a huge amount of hours."*

What we see throughout this section, is the need to assess the structures that surround the Officers as to bring out the strengths of social comparison (e.g. motivation to self-develop) and diminish the dangers (e.g. overly competitive attitudes; Festinger, 1954). We also need to practice caution in the way in which we praise and evaluate Officer success, as to not positively reinforce excessive and negative working behaviours. Of course, this does not mean that we should not congratulate our Officers on their successes, but instead encourage them work in a way that optimises their efforts without having detrimental effects to the individual's wellbeing.

## 4.5 Connectedness within the UoNSU

Throughout the data, it is clear that participants perceive some element of disconnect between themselves and other staff at the Union: particularly with the senior management team (SMT) in previous years. It might be that this is, to some extent, symptomatic of the organisational change

that the Union has been through in recent history. A couple of participants mentioned feeling as though the culture surrounding Officers at UoNSU was wrong. When asked to explain what they meant by this, one former Officer visualised it for us, explaining that a good SU would look like a circle with the Officers at the centre of that. But for this participant, they instead felt that UoNSU Officers were treated very separate to the rest of the organisation and its activities.

**Objective setting and strategic focus**

This disconnect was most felt with regards to objective setting procedures at UoNSU. Not only were the timelines of these procedures very different, but the incongruence between the focus of Officers and SU teams made achieving and delivering on such objectives difficult for them: and would often mean that they were pulling in different strategic directions.

> Participant: "I think that when new Officers come in at some students' unions with new manifestos and ways to make change, that kind of dictates the objectives for teams around it for the whole year..."
>
> Facilitator: "So, you don't think that's what happens now at UoNSU?"
>
> Participant: "Not in all the teams and it should do"
>
> "And at the time, the problem was that the staff would have their personal objectives set before the Officer team. And that was an issue because you might have someone who wants to go in direction A, then you have another person who wants to go in direction B"

Because of this, Officers perceived some resistance and barriers in achieving their goals. Not necessarily because staff are unwilling to help, but as meeting their own departmental objectives and KPIs are so important to them, there is limited flexibility and capacity to take on additional work: and help Officers achieve theirs. A few participants spoke about how this could leave them feeling that there was a negative perception of the Officer team. Because of the nature of their work being reactive and immediate at times, they got the impression that they were a burden or annoyance to other staff teams. On the other hand though, those who felt their objectives aligned well with the Union's focus, and teams more specifically, found achieving their objectives relatively unproblematic. With this, they were satisfied with the level of professional support they had received, and even identified that it was beyond what they expected or saw others receiving.

With uncertainty surrounding the strategic narrative over the past few years, it is likely to have impacted on how Officers feel their work reflects the organisation's values and has only made this perceived disconnect between the Officers and the rest of the organisation seem more pronounced. As seen in the engaging for success report (MacLeod & Clarke, 2009), strategic narrative was a key component in engaging employees in the workplace, and now that the implementation of a new strategy is in full swing, it is hopeful that these negative feelings will start to disperse from here on out. But this alone will not streamline processes and address these negative experiences in their entirety. Working in a way that actively compliments the work and objectives of the Officer team, and is overall more flexible in approach, might be what is needed to ensure that our goals as a Union are aligned. Particularly as this was identified as a problem attributed to the structures in place, not those at the Union.

## 4.6 Wellbeing and support structures
**Wellbeing**

From all that has been discussed, it should be unsurprising to learn that an Officer's wellbeing[3] is regularly impacted by the role they do. Relatively poor wellbeing was seen across the sample, some more temporary than others. But above all else, these instances seem most attributed to conflict and pressure within the role, with participants feeling: demotivated, stressed, low, and overwhelmed. As well as in the interviews, we saw these themes reflected within the diary task also:

> *"Today, I've felt sluggish at work. I don't feel much motivation for what I'm doing anymore and it's basically just taking every day as it comes. My mood increased when interacting with people during our meetings, but when I'm left to my own devices I find it very hard to stay focused."*

> *"Generally feeling quite down and burned out again."*

> *"I think empathy is really a gift and a curse in this role, as I do feel that no matter how much I do it's not enough."*

Within the interviews, Officers were asked to explore what had helped them to manage their wellbeing while working at the Union. This included: informal support from friends, family, and colleagues, setting healthy working behaviours and boundaries, attending personal or group counselling sessions, and professional, work-related support structures. Two of our current Officers highlighting:

> *"I have really good working relationships with people with positional power who can get things done. So, that is a really good support network for me because if I have an issue, I go to them and they say 'okay let's sort this'."*

> *"I kind of have some people within the career staff team, I just go to and we'd chat through things. And without them... you wouldn't be able to do what you do if that makes sense. And so I think building those relationships was really transformative"*

Officers across the years, really praised where staff had taken the initiative to check in on them, and see how they were doing. It gave them the opportunity to sense check and to talk through their feelings: as to not bottle up or catastrophise them. While it is positive to see that Union support structures are working to improve wellbeing for some, this is not true across the years and is not felt consistently within the team. A couple of participants spoke about 'just getting through it 'and learning how to cope with their wellbeing, or a situation at hand that would significantly impact their wellbeing, by themselves: which had proved quite difficult. In contrast though, when asked what they had learned from their time in role, seven out of nine participants spoke about how being an Officer had helped them to grow as a person and in confidence: with mental resilience featuring core to that.

The improvement of support structures is not something that can transform overnight, but understanding what is expected from such structures will help us to help our Officer teams to manage their wellbeing: especially so that workplace stresses do not become overwhelming or have long-term impacts.

**Support structures**

As a result of the disconnect felt between staff and Officers, the level of support available to the Officer team has felt somewhat flawed over the years. But what exactly is meant by support and

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[3] NB: The way in which an Officer's wellbeing was defined was left down to their discretion as to not lead or prime in any way.

how can it be improved? The answer to this question appears to break down into three distinct areas: the volume, the appropriateness, and the accessibility of support.

Our participants recognise gaps in what is available to the Officer team, and took the time to address support provisions that are not currently in place that they would like to have seen throughout their time. While some of these expected provisions have been explored throughout the report, the most prevalent idea explored mentoring opportunities. Some participants recognised that there had been a mentoring scheme set up in previous years with members of SMT, with varying degrees of success. What we see now, is a desire for a mentoring scheme that utilises former Officers being mentors to those currently in position. Not only was this identified as an expectation for future years, but a couple of former Officers themselves talked about being willing to be part of such a programme.

> *"So it might be that we have previous Officers as a point of call. I don't know how that would work. But let's say [an Officer] of this year needs to talk to me, or to talk to someone from the Officer team, they should feel that they can. They feel that they can talk to us, you know, just to have someone who knows the role, who knows the pressures, who knows and understands it. So I think that's one thing that was missing."*

It is important to note that what has been implemented, this year in particular, has been praised. Officers have found value in attending group counselling sessions and have felt a positive shift in the support given from SU staff overall. When they have asked for support in their role, staff have generally worked hard to provide that support. But what we are not seeing is a consistent and proactive approach to support. With Officers having been a central figure in the Union for decades now, they question why support has not yet been perfected: especially when the call for support and expectations surrounding these structures are relatively similar across the years. Instead, we see some disparity between Officer positions and the quality of their support structures: appearing dependent not upon availability of central SU support, but upon already-established working connections with the role itself.

Throughout the years, there has been some frustration with SMT with regards to the support in place. It appears that this is at least partly indicative of unclear leadership and management of the Officer team. Because there is a lack of knowledge about what support is available to Officers more widely, this frustration is often directed in this way. In reality, our Officers have available to them, an organisation with a breadth of experience and expertise, but there is such ambiguity about teams 'capacity to do so and who the best person to approach is for this, that they often do not seek help in this way at all. Again, those currently in position attribute this to the organisational review, and expect further clarity surrounding staff roles and support structures. It might be that Officers feel that there is a lack of support altogether, but what this also highlights is an issue of accessibility.

> *Facilitator: "You mentioned that it would be good for new Officers to know about the culture of the Union. In short, now having been in the role, what would you tell a new Officer to help them understand that?"*
>
> *Participant: "I think one of the things that we were always told at the start, was that we're the leaders of the Union, and like we're the leaders of the organisation, but no one said what that means and what your responsibilities are and how you can be supported. And when you're told you're a leader of the organisation you kind of think 'who do I go to if I need help? Who can I speak to about this thing?' And the training that we got from each department didn't really touch on that. It was 'we do this', it wasn't 'we do this and this is how we can support you', which I think is the change that might be beneficial."*

Ultimately, the volume of support available for each Officer is felt to be variable. We need to be mindful of this, as to ensure that all Officers have central provisions available to them, regardless of their focus or established working relationships with other staff. As well as this, it should be our priority as a Union to ensure that the right people are available to provide support to the Officers, and that it is clear what different departments can support with. Streamlining our strategic focus is likely to aid this, but being proactive and understanding the support needs of these individuals is of high importance.

**Transition and handover**

Coming into the role, individuals are quickly required to figure out what kind of Officer they are wanting to be, while also navigating a more general and steep learning curve. Only months ago these Officers were students, the very voice that they now represent in their day-to-day life. The recent nature of being a student undoubtedly holds power in understanding the population itself, but can be an overwhelming shift in their perspective, focus, power and influence.

For some, their transition into the role of an SU representative was their first time in employment. Navigating this, and developing an understanding of who they are within a work environment was felt to be a challenge in itself. Let alone being catapulted into a senior position, in which they must quickly get to grips with what type of leader they are, and how to optimise this for the benefit of both the organisation and student membership. As a result of this, some had struggled to understand what kind of influential power that this new identity held for them.

> *"You're directly from university, you start your first job and don't get me wrong, this is not like any other job that you ever start, you're basically in charge of 34,000 students, you're in charge of a team in the SU, you're representing the university, and you're talking to all of the council members of the University. So it's quite a lot of pressure for something that you just start, we did get a lot of training prior to starting, but I think there needs to be an understanding of the level of power and lack thereof of your power to influence change. And I think that's one of the biggest things, that's quite difficult."*

> *"It is a stressful job. You're 21 years old thrown into being supposedly the level of a director or a trustee with very little training. Like it's always going to be stressful but I'm definitely the kind of person who really let that get to me"*

One participant highlighted that the role of an Officer is relatively incomprehensible until you are in that role yourself. And with that, knowing how to prepare and set yourself up for a positive and productive year is really difficult. Not only did this reflect a lack of understanding of the role itself, but also how feasible and realistic their goals and objectives would be once in position. Some Officers reflect that, in hindsight, their intentions were often too niche to create impactful change, or too vague to actually achieve them. While participants generally recognised that they receive a good amount of transitional training and handover information, it appears that this must become more focused on the adjustment itself more than anything else. To guide this, it might be appropriate for the Union to utilise findings surrounding role responsibilities (see section 4.1), to review the efficacy and appropriateness of transition and handover periods.

While this transition was steep and relatively challenging, Officers also took some time to explore the learning that this had facilitated. It had helped them to: excel their professional career and determine its direction, learn professional skills that they would not have learnt elsewhere, and experience working within diverse teams and diverse spaces. And with this, all participants recognised how proud they were to have influenced change and made improvements for the benefit of UoN students: particularly when given such limited time to do so.

# 5. Conclusions

The Union has been in a phase of transition for a few years now, and if we are expecting a cultural shift not only for our organisation, but for our Officers more specifically, this is not something that will happen overnight. In fact, from observing the data, what we can see is that positive change for our Officer team is already starting to happen and we are in a very different place (both strategically and structurally) than what is seen of four years ago. And while there was little difference in the type of experiences felt by those currently and previously in position, former Officers made a clear distinction between how they felt when in the role to how they feel now.

While the role had provided them with challenges and experiences that were difficult, they now reflect that if it were not for their time as an Officer, they would not be as professionally advanced as they are now. In other words, the professional and personal development that they have gained within this environment has been like no other, and has allowed them access to unique opportunities and knowledge. Throughout this research we have been able to establish challenges most significant to these individuals, as well as what support has been (or is expected to be) most appropriate and effective in alleviating such challenges. By using the knowledge we now have available to us, we can seek to lessen the disparity between how our Officers feel in and outside of the role: as it should not be that our student representatives have to go through particularly difficult situations to achieve such development.

The perpetuation of issues concerning the support of Officers across the past four years demonstrates that this is not necessarily the product of individuals within the organisation, but more so about the structures themselves and the inconsistency of those. What is needed from us as a Union, is to begin discussions about how we can best tailor support by placing emphasis on the uniqueness of the Officer role itself. We must pursue a proactive support system and approach to working with our student leaders, as to bridge the perceived disconnect that has been felt across the years. And while making improvements incrementally might be frustrating for Officers who have such limited time in role, it is important that we get this right. We, as a Union, are making some progress towards understanding and supporting our Officers. But we must sustain this momentum and make sure that our energies are focused on ensuring our Officers are able to thrive within their individual roles, as well as a cohesive team.

# 6. Recommendations

1.  To build a better understanding surrounding Officer roles and responsibilities, both within the Union staff teams and with prospective Officers, through the implementation of individual role profiles.

2.  To support Officers with workload and work tasks

    a)  To set clear expectations of the Officer role regarding workload and working hours. For instance, when it might be appropriate to sacrifice personal time and what support is available to help with regards to this.

    b)  Explore alternative workload structures by promoting shared responsibility and managing administrative tasks in a smarter way.

    c)  Help our Officer teams to set healthy work boundaries, especially where they might work from home in the future.

3.  To improve the structures in place to support Officers

    a)  To implement permanent and proactive approaches to team building exercises and conflict resolution.

    b)  To continue to offer group counselling opportunities, for when future Officer teams might need them.

    c)  The implementation of media training, or a more appropriate alternative, to help Officers deal with the challenges that arise from being a public figure.

    d)  To create clear guidance of the support available to the Officer, and who is most appropriate to help with such issues, whether that be wellbeing or professional support.

    e)  To begin an Officer mentoring scheme, using former Officers to mentor those currently in position. There is no evidence to say this must be matched by position/role.

    f)  Review leadership structures in place for the Officer team (for example, line-management).

4.  Re-evaluate how we define success for our Officers and ensure that the language and assessment we use, surrounding this, is most appropriate.

5.  To ensure that objective setting periods for SU staff compliment those of the Officers.

6.  Review transition and handover periods, to ensure a smooth changeover from student to student leader/representative.

7.  Observe the support structures in place throughout the sector, and learn from them with the intention of exploring new opportunities and ways of working to benefit our future Officer teams.

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# 8. Appendices

**8.1 Question guide[4]**

*Introduction*

1. Let's start by getting to know a bit more about you and your background. What did you study at UoN? And what made you want to apply for this specific Officer role?

In your diary task, we explored a bit about your responsibilities as well as how you interact with staff and students.

2. How have you found the diary task so far?

   *How did you find integrating the task into your day; how did you feel about completing the diary?*

3. Thinking more broadly than your diary task now, how would you summarise your main responsibilities as an Officer?

*Activity*

We now have a small activity. I will be showing you a series of words and I want you to take the time to read through and understand them fully – and then to pick up to 3 words that best describe your role as an Officer.

*What you do day-to-day; How would you define your duty as an Officer? What is the purpose of your role?*

4. Taking the (1st/ 2nd/ 3rd) word you picked, what made you choose that?

5. Are there any other words that would better describe your role, that aren't on this list?

6. Were there any responsibilities that you struggled with during your time as an Officer?

7. Were you particularly good at any of these?

*General experience*

8. What has your overall experience been like as an elected, full-time Officer at UoNSU?

   *Ensure that you are thinking only about your time in this full-time position.*

   a. What are some high points that you can recall? What was particularly enjoyable?

   b. Was there anything that was particularly challenging with being an Officer?

   c. Do you think you have changed as a person during your time as an Officer? *How?*

*Communication*

9. Thinking about how you communicate with others in your role (whether that be Union staff, University staff or students), what has your experience of that been?

   *How do you typically interact with other members of staff? What tone/content/methods would you use to speak to x?*

   a. How does this differ from university staff to union staff? If at all?

   b. How is the tone and method you use different from talking with students?

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[4] This question guide was followed for all current Officers. For all former Officers, the tense was altered and questions regarding the diary task were removed.

    c.    Do you face any issues with communication in your role?

    *What was it that didn't work? What worked particularly well then do you think?*

**Wellbeing and Support**

10. How would you describe your wellbeing during your time as an Officer?

    a.    How do you manage any particularly challenging times?

    *Have you sought help from anyone? If no then why? If yes what was your experience?*

    b.    Is there anything that has helped you to manage your wellbeing during your time as an Officer?

11. Is there anything that isn't currently in place that you would like to see, to help Officers with their wellbeing?

    *What would you expect to be in place to support Officers with their wellbeing? Is there anything that you would like to see improved or introduced to help Officers with their wellbeing?*

**Summary Questions**

12. What is something that you have learnt through being an Officer, and can you give an example of where/how you have learnt it?

    *This could be something about yourself, a skill or ability*

13. I'm aware that you haven't yet reached the end of your role, but looking back, what is something that you are you proud of?

    *That could be a particular piece of work, a change you made, personal growth, how you dealt a particular situation*

14. And with this, is there anything else that you would like to share that you haven't yet covered?

**8.2 Role responsibilities task**

Expert    Professional    Policy maker

Administrator    Advisor    Coordinator

Influencer

Leader    Delegate

Representative