

OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION

Central Executive Committee (CEC)

22 – 24 January 2021

ELECTIONS REVIEW

The CEC is asked to:-

- i) **discuss** improvements and changes to the election procedure.

1. Elections Review Working Group

- 1.1 The elections provide the Association with a number of challenges in terms of engagement and understanding. We are continuously and consistently met with low voter turnout and vacant or uncontested elections for various positions. This was highlighted as an issue in the 2018 election, and remains an issue as shown in the most recent elections, for which an Autumn by-election was needed to fill the vacant positions.
- 1.2 A small group was convened, led by VP Admin, Matt Porterfield and Head of Volunteering and Representation, Beth Metcalf, to begin the election review early to allow plenty of time to implement changes in time for the 2022 elections. The group consists of VP Community (Anca), VP Admin (Matt), Student Council Member (Danielle), Head of Policy and Public Affairs (Dan), Head of Student Support (Verity) and Head of Volunteering and Representation (Beth).
- 1.3 As a group we have reviewed existing data and feedback to inform discussion and make suggestions for CEC to discuss. We will also be consulting with yourselves, Student Volunteers, students with little to no involvement with the Association, and with the staff team, to establish a set of recommendations to bring to you in the summer.

2. Areas to discuss

We ask for your input to support us in prioritising changes to the current process, providing feedback and ideas on the following:

- 2.1 Improving voter turnout

- 2.1.1 Feedback from students during and after elections indicates that students do not always know what they are voting for and the importance of this in a member led organisation. We have also received feedback from several sources to advise that students feel we are only interested in hearing from them during elections and survey time. For these reasons it is important for our communication channels to be highlighting what we are already doing with and for students as well as putting out calls to action.
 - 2.1.2 Ensuring that the Communication plan for the year includes regular updates and information from current CEC and Trustees as well as features, videos and information on how we are run, how students can be involved in the democratic process and information of when to expect elections/by-elections, ensuring that these areas are given the visibility and resources needed to ensure we are able to inform and support students to understand the importance of this process, and engage them in voting.
- 2.2 Decreasing uncontested or vacant positions & encouraging new students to stand for election
- 2.2.1 Review role descriptions in preparation for rules revision, looking to ensure they are clear, realistic and fair representations of the roles. Consideration is needed as to whether the CEC's responsibilities need to be reviewed and passed to newly created sub committees. It could be that large amounts of time are being spent on activity not in individual's remits, or that there is certain work which could be delegated to other volunteers. **We would be interested to hear CEC's view on this matter**, sharing any work within their own remits which they feel could be delegated to appropriately trained and supported volunteers to make their role more manageable or better aligned to the strategy.
 - 2.2.2 Role description templates and information provided needs to be reviewed to ensure they are open, appealing and jargon free.
- 2.3 Supporting the student population to understand what roles entail
- 2.3.1 Again, inclusion of elections in an annual Communication plan is vital.
 - 2.3.2 How could we introduce a fact checker during the process or provide support to candidates before they stand/submit their nominations, or upon receipt of nominations before these are published on the website. E.g. I noticed in your manifesto that you have said X, did you know that would not be within the remit of this role.
 - 2.3.3 Provision of pastoral support in a 1:many or 1:1 format for candidates, to support their understanding of the organisation and our mission ahead of any questions from the electorate. Briefings to include how to answer difficult questions and where to look for important information if needed.
- 2.4 Culture and use of forums/video etc.

2.4.1 There is always a large drop out from candidates at the stage of submitting videos. The introduction of live or recorded 'hustings' via a platform like MS Teams (with student questions sent in) could remove the need for submission of candidate videos if these were then shared online. This could be a friendly and welcoming interview, recorded with minimal or no audience, or 1:1 with a staff member and the candidate and then be shared online. We would have the option to ask questions in advance which allows individuals to do some research, or to expect everyone to answer off the cuff. This would allow for the 'videos' to all be in the same format, whilst also allowing questions to be answered as submitted by students. This format would need to be scoped out by the working group for approval, but is achievable if the electorate were given a time period within which to submit questions, these could then be put to appropriate candidates within a teams session, which is attended by either all candidates for that role, or individuals. Video recordings could then be shared on our social media and website. **We would welcome comments and ideas on this suggestion.**

2.4.2 **Are forums still the right place for hustings or could live online versions replace this?**

2.5 Staff time spent on elections

2.5.1 Throughout the year we believe elections should be kept in mind at all times, ensuring the content we share informs the student population of what we do and how we are run, always signposting to ways to be involved. It is important that this aspect is considered a priority for our Communications plan and staff resource should be allocated to this commitment.

2.5.2 Staff spend a large amount of time working overtime to moderate student election forums through evenings and weekends. This is not a role that is suitable for student moderators due to conflicts of interest in moderating fellow volunteers or preventing themselves from asking questions. In line with our culture review and the cost of this overtime to the Association, is there a better way of conducting hustings? Are there ways to reduce this cost/ run hustings differently (see above section on culture)?

2.5.3 The Returning Officer role is generally taken on by Senior or Middle management, and is done alongside existing role, often meaning elections can affect other project progression. **The working group would like to hear comments on researching the use of an external Returning Officer service for elections to relieve some pressure.**

2.6 Trustee/CEC elections

2.6.1 **Considering these roles require very different skills and experience, does it still make sense for these elections to be held at the same time?**

2.6.2 **Are there any roles which require previous experience, skills or additional checks to ensure postholder is able to complete the role?**

2.7 Governance

2.7.1 How can decisions about future posts be made in an unbiased way considering those who may wish to stand again have potential conflict of interest in these decisions and suggestions?

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Vice President Administration

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