

**OPEN UNIVERSITY STUDENTS ASSOCIATION****Central Executive Committee (CEC)**

17 – 18 April 2021

**Evaluation of Wales Student Volunteer Panel Pilot**

---

The CEC is asked to:-

- i) **receive** the evaluation of the Wales Student Volunteer Panel pilot
- ii) **approve** the reconvening of the Nation Volunteer Working Group

**1. Introduction/Background**

- 1.1 The creation of a nation volunteer role was approved at the October 2019 CEC meeting (CEC 10/19/11). Recruitment opened for a six-month pilot in May 2020 and volunteers were inducted in early July 2020. It was agreed that at the end of the pilot period, a review would be carried out to evaluate the success of the project and examine the possibility of roll-out across the other nations.
- 1.2 The role description agreed by CEC stated that volunteers “*by supporting the elected Area Association Representative (AAR) for Wales, will:*”
  - *Help build the OU community in Wales*
  - *Build positive relationships with the OU, higher education organisations, the devolved Government and any other relevant external bodies.*
  - *Attend OU meetings and events in local to you Wales alongside or in place of and to deputise for the AAR.*
  - *Gather feedback on wider OU and higher education issues such as funding, education, finance, policies and legislation as well as nation-specific student issues*
  - *Provide nation-specific signposting and support.*
  - *Ensure the student voice is heard throughout Wales.”*
- 1.3 The review process was led by Ellie Milnes-Smith (*Volunteering and Representation Officer*) in consultation with Lorena Fontan-Grana (*Area Association Representative for Wales*) and Dan Moloney (*Director of Engagement, then Policy and Public Affairs Manager*) – who were the CEC and staff leads respectively. Also involved in the evaluation process were:

- Student members of the Panel (6 total)
- Peter Turner (*Head of Student Community*)
- Nicola Powell (*Volunteer Training and Wellbeing Officer*)
- Alayla Castle-Herbert (*OU in Wales – Policy Officer*)
- Ceri Wilcock (*OU in Wales – Assistant Director, Student Experience*)
- OU students in Wales (via poll in Facebook group)

## 2. **Successes**

It should be recognised that the Panel achieved some very significant success in a short space of time, particularly given the challenges associated with COVID-19 and the transition to a new AAR. The particular areas of success are what might be considered the core objectives for the pilot – building the student community in Wales, raising awareness of the Students Association in Wales, and building the relationship of the OU in Wales.

### 2.1 **Building the relationship with the OU in Wales (*Influence & Transform*)**

This was the highlight of the Panel's work from both the perspective of the Association volunteers/staff and the OU in Wales. There was significant and effective collaboration between the two groups, particularly in the area of student voice.

The OU in Wales has expressed a strong desire to be involved in any future incarnation of the Panel, although they have also indicated that they would prefer a more formalised relationship in this context.

### 2.2 **Building the OU student community in Wales (*Engage & Involve*)**

Although COVID-19 has prevented face-to-face events, the online community has grown considerably thanks to the Panel, with regular meet-ups hosted by the Panel and the growth of the Facebook group from 600 members to over 1,100 members.

A poll in the Facebook group indicated that, out of the areas of operation of the panel, the aspect which was most important to students was building the student community in Wales.

### 2.3 **Raising awareness of the OU Students Association in Wales (*Inform & Support*)**

The increase in numbers of students subscribed to the Association's Wales newsletter, interacting with Panel members in the Facebook group, and attending events such as Club Cymru (run by the Panel) has led to a much greater awareness of the OU Students Association amongst Welsh students. This has also been supported by the introduction of a Wales-specific session run during freshers' week with the help of the Panel.

### 2.4 **Supporting the creation of the Wales Manifesto (*Influence & Transform*)**

The Panel played a significant part in developing the Students Association's first Wales Manifesto for the Senedd elections 2021. Panel members were able to offer their perspectives on issues such as digital exclusion, childcare grants, cost of living increases, and financial support for part-time students

### **3. Areas for improvement**

As with all pilot schemes, there are some areas for improvement both in terms of the future of the panel in Wales and other nations, and in terms of supporting volunteers. It would be sensible to address these areas before any continuation or further roll-out of the Panel.

#### **3.1 Scope of the role**

The scope of the role was extremely broad and this resulted in volunteers having different expectations of what the main focus of the role would be - both in terms of the day-to-day activities, and the relationship between the Panel and AAR. This was exacerbated by the transition to a new AAR between the proposal and the implementation of the Panel and proved to be the biggest barrier to the Panel's success.

Some members perceived their role as being directly supportive of the AAR and her activities (such as running community events) whilst others perceived their role as being more of a representative voice of Welsh students, with the role of the AAR being to facilitate that voice. Although it may be possible to reconcile these two approaches, some consideration is needed to determine whether this would sit within the scope of a single role, or whether it would be more appropriate to split the role.

The OU in Wales was also not involved in the original proposal and further consideration is needed to determine where the strategic goals of the Students Association and the OU in Wales overlap in relation to the scope of the Panel, and where they differ.

#### **3.2 Support and training for AAR's**

3.2.1 **Training for the AAR** in facilitating/chairing meetings and in volunteer management would have been beneficial in terms of ensuring the smooth operation of the Panel and its meetings. As the number of volunteers increases, it is more likely that CEC and other experienced volunteers will find themselves in the position of leading or supporting other volunteers and similar training may also be useful to other volunteers.

3.2.2 **Deputisation.** This was something which was incorporated into the role description, but as this requires both a strong institutional knowledge and a commitment to upholding the priorities of the elected AAR, it may be more effective to ask existing student representatives to deputise for the AAR.

#### **3.3 Representivity of the Panel and Welsh language**

It was noted that the majority of student participants were from within the "M4 corridor" with no participants from North Wales. It was also noted that the role was not advertised in Welsh, something which may have dissuaded Welsh speakers.

#### **3.4 Student support**

Although not in response to any particular incident, concerns were raised about the possibility of Panel members being approached unofficially in a

supportive role (e.g. via social media) – a role which Panel members are not equipped or trained to carry out. It may be helpful to compile some nation-specific resources which volunteers can signpost to without having to offer support to students themselves.

### **3.5 Volunteer behaviour**

The challenging and sometimes inappropriate behaviour of a small number of students was something which was flagged by both staff from the Association and the OU in Wales, and by student volunteers who had witnessed or been subjected to this behaviour. Unfortunately, the staff and CEC members involved were not sufficiently well equipped to address this behaviour effectively. This is something which the Volunteering and Representation Team is now addressing as a matter of urgency with a view to:

- Training staff and students in addressing difficult behaviour effectively
- Clearly highlighting the expectations for volunteer behaviour laid out in the Volunteer Agreement and Social Media Policy (as it comes into being)
- Setting out clearer courses of action and consequences for behaviour which contravenes the Volunteer Agreement

## **4. Recommendations**

- 4.1 It is recommended that the Nation Volunteer Working Group be reconvened with a view to re-developing a role description (or descriptions) which might be suitable for roll-out across all four nations and continental Europe (subject to CEC approval). The working group should consider lessons learned from the pilot in Wales, and which aspects of the role are location dependent.

This working group originally consisted of the Area Association Representatives from all four nations and continental Europe and relevant Association staff. In the absence of a full complement of AAR's, the CEC may wish to appoint alternative student representatives from outside of the CEC.

4.1.1 It is recommended that this working group give particular consideration to the scope of the role

4.1.2 It is recommended that representatives from the OU in Wales, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Republic of Ireland and any other relevant OU bodies be consulted by the working group throughout the role development process

**Lorena Fontan-Grana**  
**Area Association Representative (Wales)**

**Ellie Milnes-Smith**  
**Volunteering and Representation Officer**