

Council Update – 11th May 2021 – Speaker Notes

Thanks you for giving the Association another agenda slot – it's great to be able to let you have more updates on our work.

Slide 1 – The Student Leadership Team

I'd like to kick-off today's update by giving you some insights into the scale of the work of the Association's Student Leadership Team (also known as the Central Executive Committee or CEC). Alongside myself as President, Ian Cheyne Deputy President and Danielle Smith our Student Member of Council – all of whom you will know – there are another 16 members of the team with Vice-Presidents for Education, Administration, Engagement, Support, Community and EDI, alongside reps for each of the faculties including Open & Access and reps for each of the four home nations and for International students. Collectively we are responsible for leading on the delivery of our strategy and ensuring there is effective student representation at all levels and in all areas of the University. A student leadership team is elected by our membership every 2 years and with the exception of President and Deputy President – which are paid sabbatical roles – all other members of the team are volunteers.

The leadership team is currently running at a team size of only 15 as we have 4 vacancies – but since the last Council meeting in February our student leadership team have collectively:

- Attended over 800 meetings (including 70 OU committees, 90 OU working groups and 45 OU task & finish groups)
- Been contacted directly by over 700 students asking us to address issues – the most commonly occurring issues are around student financing, tutor issues and queries around EMAs & TMAs
- Put in just under 2,800 hours!

I wanted to share these stats to demonstrate the sheer scale of the work undertaken by the student leadership team, a small team of predominantly volunteers who are balancing our volunteering commitments alongside studying and often alongside working, caring responsibilities, home schooling and many other commitments – we care passionately about making sure students are properly represented and this is a huge commitment - but we love knowing that we truly are making a difference for students.

Slide 2 – Governance Review

I also wanted to let you have a quick update on a Governance Review that we have just completed. Following our Culture Review that was carried out during 2019-20, a decision was made to commission a full Governance Review for the organisation to look at areas including:

- The transparency & suitability of our governance processes & procedures
- The adequacy of roles & responsibilities and terms of reference for decision-makers
- The reflection of our values in governance practices
- The transparency & agility of our decision-making
- The suitability of our election procedures and appointment processes

An external agency was appointed to carry out this review and they have just concluded this process and have presented their findings and recommendations to the Student Leadership Team, the staff team and our Board of Trustees who are now considering the next steps. We'll be able to give some further updates on this later in the year.

Slide 3 – Devolved Government Elections

The timing of this meeting is topical, as my final update is on the elections that were taking place in England, Scotland and Wales last week. As part of our ambitious policy and public affairs agenda, we worked hard to get part-time and distance-learning high on the agendas of candidates standing in the elections in the two devolved governments.

Since publishing our Welsh & Scottish manifestos, which I mentioned briefly in my February update, we have continued to raise awareness both among candidates and our members in the nations. In the run up to the elections, we emailed the manifestos directly to all candidates for whom we have contact details (around 250 in Wales and 500 in Scotland).

We received many very supportive responses from across the political spectrum in both nations, just to share a few examples:

From a SNP candidate in Scotland:

"I wholeheartedly agree with the policies highlighted in the manifesto Digital accessibility is key and it is something that needs addressed in lots of areas in Scotland. Disabled students should not have to do deal with the bureaucracy and the yearly assessments to prove their disabilities if elected in May, I would be more than happy to support your manifesto pledges to ensure more equitable support is in place."

From a Labour candidate in Scotland:

"I am a graduate of the O.U and agree with your manifesto. There are still too many inequalities in the system."

From a Green Party candidate in Wales

"... we agree with all of your asks and would fully support a review into removing barriers for people with protected characteristics, and also raising the cap on childcare grants."

From a Labour candidate in Wales:

"Should I be re-elected to the Senedd these are issues that I would hope to consider as part of a commitment to lifelong learning opportunities."

We'll be contacting successful candidates to ensure that our policy agenda stays firmly on their radar.

We also created a campaigning tool on our website to engage students in Wales and Scotland with both the manifesto and the elections. The tool enabled students to select their voting district and auto-create an email to send to all of their local and regional candidates containing the manifesto and asking candidates to consider and support our policy asks.

Those are the few updates I wanted to share this time – but I'll just end on one final note - as you know the Association is a little bit younger than the University itself – so it is our 50th Birthday next year. We have lots of plans in the pipeline to celebrate and honour all of our wonderful OU students, past and present. We'll share more details on our plans later in the year.