nus charity

OFFICER WELLBEING RESEARCH

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Introduction

Which other industry has students leading multi-million-pound organisations? What if they've never had a job before? How are we (NUS Charity and students' unions) ensuring they have the best possible term? How are we all supporting them to reach the ridiculous highs, or supporting them from any terrible lows?

Parallels can be drawn between elected officers and professional athletes; with the wider organisation playing the supporting, mentoring, and coaching role. That comes with pitfalls, with some officers being subjected to increasingly toxic environments online, not feeling supported in their organisation, and feeling the brunt of student criticism.

In 2022, NUS Charity conducted a research project into the experiences of SU and NUS officers over the past ten years. We asked them about their experience in the role, and the impact the role had on them in their later lives.

This report will review the background, research, and approach to the officer experience project.

Background and Aims

We know that students' union and NUS officers are under intense scrutiny as part of their role as elected representatives. We see similar pressures in the roles of MPs, activists and vocal people in society. Increasingly we have had the conversation around this evolving role, what it looks like in today's world, and what affect that can be having on the individuals elected to the roles.

Mental health awareness has also grown exponentially, and striving to ensure our roles are accessible, and people are able to have a healthy and balanced life at work is something the movement has grappled with for a number of years. With public office comes scrutiny, and the level of scrutiny we can expose our officers

(who are employed by our organisations) to, can be overwhelming.

The online space has shifted dramatically in the last ten years, and even more so since the Covid-19 pandemic. Our society is used to instant communication, next-day delivery and real time news alerts – how this trickles down to the activity of our SUs, and the access that students have to their representatives has been a challenging hill to climb for our sector, and especially for officers.

Through this research, we hope to highlight the experiences of officers over the last decade, shining a light on how we support officers as a sector, and what we might do differently to improve their experiences for years to come.

Contacts

Union Development Team
Website: www.nusconnect.org.uk
Email: uniondevelopment@nus.org.uk

Think Positive
Website: thinkpositive.scot
Email: via website

Methodology

To ensure we had a decent sample size to begin the conversation, NUS Charity went out to current and former officers at the beginning of February 2022 through an online questionnaire. Promoted through NUS Charity emails, social media, and reaching out to students' unions, it took roughly 10 minutes to and was live for three weeks.

Key demographics and characteristics of the respondents:

- 468 current or previous officers completed the survey
- One in three participants had a disability, impairment, or long-term health condition
- 93% were from higher education and 7% from further education
- 86% full-time, 9% part-time and 5% NUS officers
- 59% women, 36% men, 5% non-binary
- 79% of online survey participants defined themselves as white and 18% non-white, with 3% preferring not to say
- In the focus groups, 14 participants defined as white and 2 non-white
- Respondents came from students' unions/associations from across the UK, with varying institution size and mission groups

Following the questionnaire, NUS Charity organised three online focus groups in March 2022 conducted by our specialist insight consultants. The advantages of an online focus group included:

- Participants can communicate with each other as well as the moderator
- Participants can join from anywhere if they have an internet connection allowing for privacy and no geographical restraints
- Participants tend to be more honest because the NUS Insight Team could ensure complete anonymity. This was especially important with the sensitive subject nature of the questions
- Selected via the online survey respondents, 16 participants were chosen through a chosen criteria and split into three different groups: current officers, previous officers from the last five years, and finally, previous officers from five to ten years.

The online focus groups took roughly an hour each.

Below is a summary of the research, split into three key themes. The survey questions and the in-depth findings from the insight team have been released alongside this report.

The role of an officer

"I didn't expect it to be as all-consuming and as complex as it was. I really just thought it would be a fun year working with students on student passion projects (it was more stuck in boardrooms with older people)"

The role of an officer

Expectation vs Reality

From the responses it was very clear officers stood for election to make a change and do something good, they wanted to make use of their skills to help other students improve their experience and help give them a voice.

However, officers were surprised by some of the aspects to the role such as university meetings or trustee board commitments and how time consuming such commitments could be.

"The biggest disparity between expectations vs reality was the total lack of time/ energy/ resource you would have to work on the stuff you really wanted to."

Support

When asked, support was most likely to come from other officers in their team alongside the chief executive of the students' union. Where support was received, satisfaction was positive. Where satisfaction was less high, respondents indicated a general lack of support from other staff, including instances of bullying.

"They're very supportive as we have meetings to discuss about things if I'm unsure of or not feeling right."

Training and regular catch ups were the main type of general support received from Officers past and present, whilst coaching, mentoring, and counselling were types of support they would appreciate more of.

"I just thought there would be more internal support than there was."

Being an officer

The most common words used to describe the role were challenging and stressful, but at the same time rewarding and exciting, reflecting the multiple experiences and sides to being an officer.

Understandably, officers much preferred tasks such as talking to students, being involved in key decision making for the organisation and running campaigns. They were less keen on admin tasks (that perhaps they had little time for), being a trustee or sitting in committee meetings.

Highlights and Lowlights

Highlights of the role are bringing about change, making a difference, collaboration and working with and for students. The staples for every good elections branding. Lowlights included being overworked, unsupported, unpleasant staff / students and the resulting impact on mental health.

"Heavy pressure; no work life balance; constant criticism; lack of support from my VPs, lack of mental health support"

Despite these ups and downs, most officers – both past and present – strongly agreed they enjoyed their time as officer; it was a great experience that was fun and rewarding.

"Leading a range of campaigns, returning the SU to a more significant position in the eyes of our members and the university, helping set in motion the changes the institution and organisation needed, being part of a wider team committed to doing things in a new way."

Describing the role of an officer

In the survey, we asked respondents to tell us the three words they'd use to best describe their role as an officer. While the main words used to describe the role were challenging and stressful, the words rewarding and exciting were also prominent.

Wellbeing

"So much responsibility and pressure leads to heightened anxiety."

Wellbeing

While in the main, officers both past and present felt they could be themselves and were supported in their roles, their physical and mental health was relatively poor.

Work/ Life Balance

Work/life balance was believed to be very poor by 59% of respondents. They explained they felt there was just too much work to do, with no clear boundaries or out-of-office time.

"Students getting in touch round the clock."

Participants in the focus groups highlighted the lifestyle of the role could be damaging, with a lack of support from students' union staff.

"Like if we didn't do overtime staff are like 'why did you run to be an officer' so there's an expectation to give up your whole life to do this role"

Officers suggested that a proper induction and training would allow them to understand what was expected of them and what they could expect from the role. By outlining clear responsibilities and boundaries would enable and empower them to understand when and where they could push back and say no.

"Half my student voice team was missing at the start of the year so I was basically doing all that work during Welcome."

Alongside preparing officers about workload and responsibilities, their work should also be managed and potentially reduced, or shared with support staff.

"My team is flexible and ensure we have the work/life balance."

Impact on Health

52% of the officers in the online survey who received accountability or criticisms as part of their role highlighted the negative impact this had on their mental health. Participants in the focus groups also discussed the longer-term effects of such high-pressure roles on their mental health. Some indicated feeling under attack, whilst others talked about being exposed to sensitive and harrowing issues as a point of contact for students.

"So much responsibility and pressure leads to heightened anxiety."

According to officer's past and present, better inductions could prepare officers for what's coming. Ensuring staff are on hand to support, and that there are processes in place for officers and staff to refer to / use when needed.

Day-to-day support such as interventions, sense checks and mentors were also thought to be things that would improve the health of officers.

"There's literally too much to do and there's a lot of stress involved. When you're overworked/ stressed/ burned out you can't separate things well and you let others and yourself cross work/ life boundaries"

In terms of liberation group insight, some of the key findings included those with a disability were more likely to say their time as an officer has an impact on their physical health. officers with a disability were less likely to have regular informal catch ups than those without.

In wider Gen-Z millennial insights outside of the NUS research, it shows the wider problem affecting all students. Deloitte reported in 2021 that 41% of millennials and 46% of Gen Z's feel stressed all or most of the time. 35% of Gen Z have taken time off work due to the pandemic related stress or anxiety, and Mind went on to report over 1/3 young people said their mental health has got much worse during the pandemic.

It's important to note that physical health was also detrimentally affected by the nature of the roles which needs to be addressed during induction but also regularly through support mechanisms. There was lots of time spent at a desk with little rest, not enough exercise and irregular routines leading to poor eating habits or little sleep.

"Being overworked means you're less likely to make healthy lifestyle choices, as does being paid a low salary."

Social Media

"It feels like your whole reputation is tied to the SU and you as a student sabb are blamed for everything."

Social Media

The last key theme highlighted was social media. How many organisations use the officers to be "the face" of the students' union? TikTok dances, video statements or promotion? Are these the same channels they're checking throughout the night, or receiving abuse on?

"It feels like your whole reputation is tied to the SU and you as a student sabb are blamed for everything."

When asked, student council and online spaces (in particular social media) are the main channels officers receive any criticism or accountability. Research went on to indicate two in five officers use their personal social media account in their roles, which could be an additional impact on work / life balance.

Whilst most officers who receive accountability receive praise (92%), 90% receive criticism and a huge 56% receive abuse. Breaking this down further, a third of officers indicate abuse comes through their own personal social media, and in particular, Facebook.

Disabled officers significantly more likely to receive abuse via their personal account. After receiving abuse, the impact on health and wellbeing is significantly more likely amongst women, whilst non-white officers are more likely to have safe spaces provided.
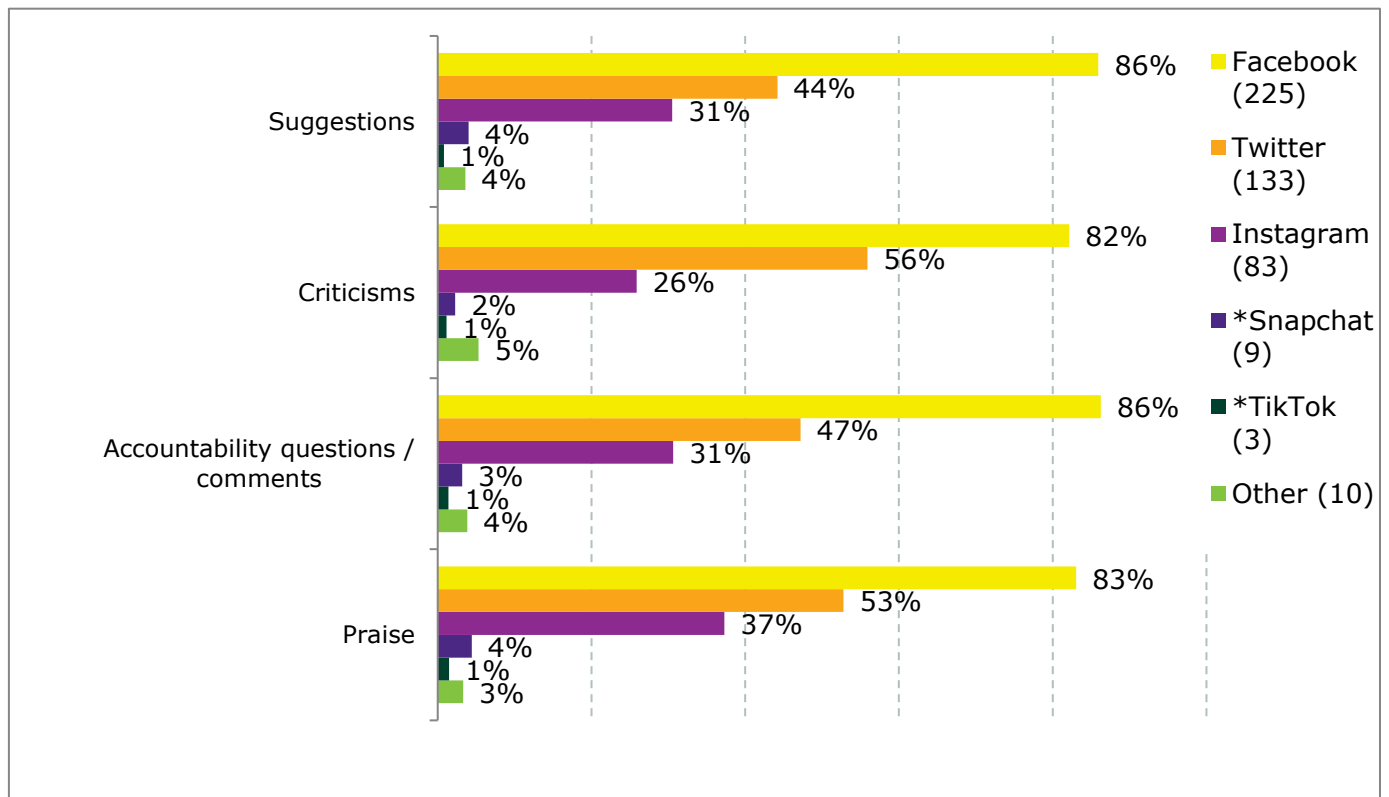
"Don't allow personal social media pages and make it have to go through the main socials run by the SA/SU. If it comes in via personal social media have policies to protect against it"

Of those who have received abuse online, the majority claim this has made their mental health worse in terms of developing anxiety, lost confidence and made them question their worth. A third of all officers indicate they have not received any training to deal with this.
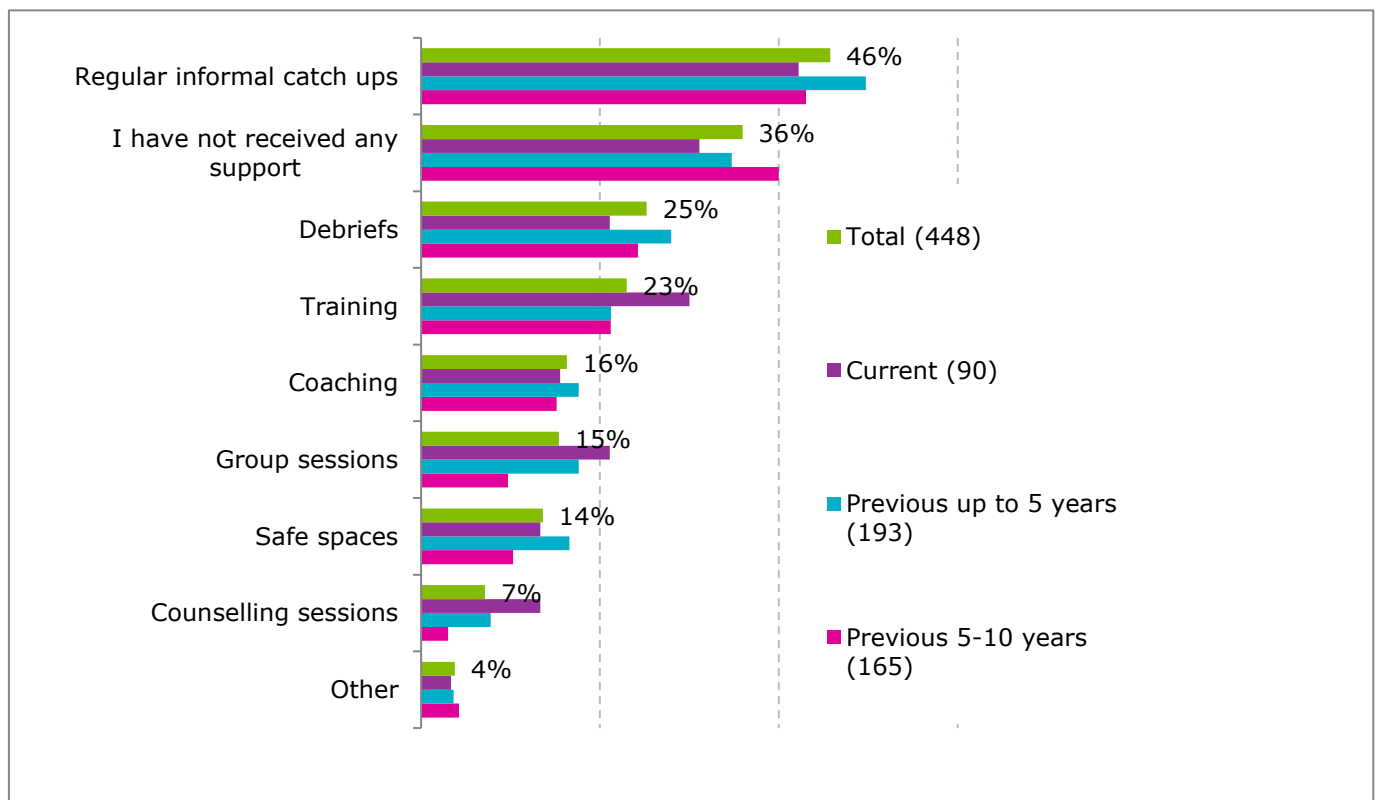
Again, respondents suggest they would appreciate clearer guidelines and / or process on how to deal with such abuse, training on what do to, and counselling to help with the impact of it.

"Social media is way more important than 10 years ago and sabbs get way more abuse and messages at 3am"

Types of communication
received via social media

Facebook (225): Suggestions 86%, Criticisms 82%, Accountability questions / comments 86%, Praise 83%

Twitter (133): Suggestions 44%, Criticisms 56%, Accountability questions / comments 47%, Praise 53%

Instagram (83): Suggestions 31%, Criticisms 26%, Accountability questions / comments 31%, Praise 37%

*Snapchat (9): Suggestions 4%, Criticisms 2%, Accountability questions / comments 3%, Praise 4%

*TikTok (3): Suggestions 1%, Criticisms 1%, Accountability questions / comments 1%, Praise 1%

Other (10): Suggestions 4%, Criticisms 5%, Accountability questions / comments 4%, Praise 3%

Support from SU/ employer
when dealing with online abuse

Total (448): Regular informal catch ups 46%, I have not received any support 36%, Debriefs 25%, Training 23%, Coaching 16%, Group sessions 15%, Safe spaces 14%, Counselling sessions 7%, Other 4%

Current (90)

Previous up to 5 years (193)

Previous 5-10 years (165)

What's next?

What's next?

Approach

NUS Charity has taken all the feedback from Officers and took time considering the next step.

There are some clear elements to work on, but it also needs to be tangible and achievable. Organisations can't hire an individual counsellor per-officer for example. It's essential this work begins now, delivering short-term changes whilst also developing long-term solutions.

As highlighted at the beginning of the report, this is not a one-size-fits-all approach. There may be elements organisations see benefitting officers, but other parts they are already delivering to a high standard.

To sum up our approach, we're keen for the work to be:

- Engaging
- Innovative
- Exciting
- Relevant; with a
- Clear narrative

Peer-to-peer videos

NUS Charity is keen to bring in more peer-to-peer content, specifically looking at videos. These lived experiences are essentially in building a bridge with best practice, alongside a format they're already engaging with. Potential approaches for this include a YouTube or TikTok series – hosting Q&As or a day-in-the-life approach. This needs to be carefully considered with the questions over social media.

Buddy system

We're putting together the foundations for a buddy system, linking up officers in similar size organisations and roles. The "new normal" gives officers a flexibility to hold regular catch ups online, potential visits to each other's institutions, or just a friendly face at conferences and training sessions.

Elected Officers' Toolkit

Officers made it clear that the level of induction and support is vastly different from organisation to organisation. To counteract this, we're putting together an elected officers' toolkit. This toolkit, written in collaboration with officers, empowers new officers, giving them an additional layer of support throughout their term.

These briefings cover:

- Hosting events
- Being a trustee
- Chairing meetings
- Handling abuse, complaints and scrutiny
- Social media
- Time management
- Dealing with stakeholders
- Elections: re-running, winning or losing
- Workplace tips including emails and calendar management
- Being the "face" of your organisation
- Reflections

Written in collaboration with officers, these easy digestible pieces of content can be read and understood 30mins before a meeting. Providing officers with a framework to utilise and boost their confidence in uncomfortable situations, alongside some top tips for working as part of their organisations.

Case studies

We know there are some great practices out there supporting officers – the feedback from the survey has confirmed it. It's essential now to consider how this can be utilised further in the movement.

We'll be putting together a range of good practice case studies and recommendations on NUS Connect, ensuring this work can be replicated in organisations of all sizes. We'll be working with students' unions to find out what

training their officers enjoyed and what external providers they return to year-on year.

There's some work here as well around counselling – if the officers are making the most of the opportunities available to them.

Highlighting these areas of good practice will help address some of the key findings from the report – from training, to social media practices, or dealing with abuse and what steps to take.

Conclusion

Conclusion

This isn't just a recommendation; this is something that NUS Charity aims to practice what we preach – starting from wellbeing sessions at Lead & Change conference and build from there.

The feedback from officers showed this couldn't be a dump of information at the start and just leaving them to deal with it. We all need to consider how we can support officers before they start, during their role, and after.

We cannot expect them to know everything before they start. They need more transparency in what the role involves – and the expectations around them. In the same token, we can't just give them a handshake and well done when they finish in July. Is there more that can be done to integrate outgoing officers back into their studies, or out into the working world.

We know after the fun of Freshers, the reality of the role kicks in. It's not just about photoshoots, nights out and fun events.

Traditionally, this is when mental health issues arrive alongside the start of issues between team members.

We believe the work will benefit the whole student movement, bringing the best of us together to benefit all officers, whatever the size. We have all seen incredible transformations in our elected officers over their time in office and we have also all seen so many go on to continue changing the world long after they've finished their term. As one ex-officer told us:

"I would do it again in a heartbeat. It has made me a better doctor; I am not scared of consultants or senior managers and it means I am way more effective when challenging the status quo."

We've been around for over 100 years; let's see what we can do in the next 5 years for our leaders.