



## **All Student Meeting Report**

### **Format**

- A presentation on the Transformation process by Change Director Emilie Tapping.
- Questions and comments from the floor.
- Workshop of individual table discussions around the topics presented by the Change Director
- Explanation of the early draft representation model for consultation
- Floor-wide feedback, further discussion, questions and suggestions.

\* It was emphasised by the Change Director that this meeting and workshop is *not* a decision-making space, but an opportunity for the SU to facilitate a conversation that provides constructive feedback for the guiding process and aspirational outcomes of the Transformation period.

### **Staff Present**

Emilie Tapping – Change Director

Nikki Smith – CEO

Rachel Hu – Policy & Representation Coordinator

Esther Holland – Communications Manager

Peter Robertson – Director, NUS Charity

Danial Hussain – SU President

Jenni Lynam – VP UG Education & Access

Rosalie Chapman – VP Welfare

\*Addi Haran Diman was also in attendance as the SU President Elect

### **Attendance**

- 32 University of Oxford students attended
- Variety of colleges were represented
- Student media were present

## **SU Leadership Values**

- Kindness
- Trust
- Solidarity
- Transparency
- Integrity
- Collaboration

## **Transformation**

### **How did we get to this point?**

- This transformation has been a long time coming.
- We need to acknowledge that there have been lots of incidents and a lack of ability to point towards significant SU impact.
- The Oxford system is complex and the SU has not met that challenge.
- We are aware that the SU is not well liked, and we need to roll back this poor reputation in order to enact meaningful change.
- An SU Review was launched in October 2023.
- Points of critical failure we identified in early 2024.
- New trustees were co-opted on to the Board in February 2024.
- The decision to go into turnaround was made in March 2024.
- The Transformation Committee was formed in April 2024.
- Trinity 2024 saw the start of Student Engagement Consultations.

### **Difficult Decisions Taken**

- Reduction in the staff team.
- Cessation of non-essential activity and activity that we don't have the resources to continue.
- Cessation/repurposing of some democratic procedures (Student Council)
- The temporary reduction of Sabbatical Officers from 6 to 3

### **The Brief – What are we aiming for?**

- We need to consider what impact we want the Oxford SU to have, and how it is achieved within such a complex governance system.
- How do we work with existing representation structures and avoid duplication?
- How do we undo poor cultures and mistakes of the past?

- How do we engage students in a meaningful way?

### **What will Transformation cover?**

- Democracy
- Elected officer effectiveness
- Representation & advocacy
- Relationship management
- Organisational governance
- People & culture
- Financial stability
- Service provision

### **Consultation**

- We have gathered 31 responses to our Student Consultation Survey
  - We are aware that this is not broad enough, and that 31 responses are not substantive enough to gather true student body representation.
- We have had consultation meetings; 10 with Rep Coms and 7 with Common Rooms.
- There have also been three individual meetings with Change Director Emilie Tapping.
- Our consultation period has featured desk research including governance reviews, previous reviews into the organisation, previous complaints, Student Council evaluations etc.
- Wednesday 12<sup>th</sup> June All Student Meeting
- Over the summer period, we plan to continue consultations with alumni, ex-officers, University and College staff.
- More direct consultation with students is planned for Michaelmas.

### **Sector Analysis**

- We analysed the structures and processes of three other Unions within the sector.
- The Liverpool Guild of Students has used sortition (the selection of elected officials by using a random representative sample), consensus building, use of Student Ideas, preferenda (multiple-choice referendums) and all student votes. They have established fewer, but more impactful, priorities.

- The Exeter Students’ Guild has been through an extensive rebuilding from the ground up process. They have enacted the use of insight to generate organisational priorities, the use of sortition, ‘survey superheroes’ (a paid panel of students who complete a monthly survey), and longer-term organisational priorities.
- Durham Students’ Union exists in a semi-collegiate university, and uses demographic splits to create an assembly, a much clearer delineation between governance and democracy.

### **Our Assessment**

- Not enough work has been done to bring the Union together to agree on priorities for students.
- The Union has been spreading ourselves too thinly. It has for too long been trying to be too many things to too many people, and this has led to a total inability to prioritise correctly.
- The existing complicated democratic structures are not accessible, nor are they doing the intended job or keeping up with modern approaches.
- There has been a blurring of democracy, representation and governance. It has been hard to discern between operational decisions vs political and representative.
  - The clarity between employment and democracy has also been blurred.
- Organisational failures have prevented the Sabbatical Officers from making progress.
- There has been a lack of outcomes/visibility of work done.
- People & culture renewal- we need continued investment in developing a high-quality staff team.
- There is no clarity on the relationship and approach with the University itself.
- There is an unclear relationship between the Union and Colleges/Common Rooms.

### **What’s Next?**

- A continued period of consultation, research & analysis.
- We need to develop a coherent theory of change- what is the actual purpose of the Oxford SU and what impact are we hoping to achieve for students and the University?
- We will begin to develop our organisation model based on the outcomes of Transformation.
- We will ensure that any changes to the constitution, byelaws and funding are made within appropriate governance structures.

- We want to see an increase in student engagement and involvement in decision-making improvements.

### **Questions from the floor (and answers provided by Change Director)**

#### **Why were the trustees co-opted in February not elected?**

Article 18.2 allows us in an emergency to appoint unelected trustees.

We had to move very fast during this time.

It was reported, as required, but didn't go through the process of nominations.

#### **Who is on the Transformation Committee?**

Committee members can be found at [this link](#).

We know that only one student and one officer on the committee is not enough.

#### **Does the Transformation Committee have power or is it just there for recommendations?**

Transformation Committee can make recommendations to the Oxford SU Trustee Board and conduct consultations with and make recommendations to Student Life Committee and Education Committee. There are some things that it is able to make decisions on, but it is a collaborative and consultative process

#### **What are your specific ideas for student engagement?**

Typical practices like incentivised surveying etc. are unfeasible right now due to budget issues.

We also need to consider how much resource we have in the immediate for student engagement.

We believe that seeing impact, and the desire to see impact, will be the biggest incentive.

#### **How is the SU funding structure compared to other SU's?**

We get our funding from the University of Oxford and commercial means including Freshers Fair.

The funding for more traditionally centralised Universities, such as Brookes, is drastically different.

The commercial side of Student Unions, such as live events and bars, will rarely break even.

In charities, funding comes through impact.

**You say there are funding issues, but services have been cut and staff numbers have been drastically reduced. Where has the money gone?**

The financial situation was coming to a head before the Union was put into Transformation.

The restructure and cessation of activity has meant that money has been freed up, but it's to put straight back into transformation.

**Would it be better to compare our funding to another decentralised university such as Cambridge? Because the Oxbridge SU's having significantly less funding is actually more reasonable, because of the collegiate systems that exist to lift certain typical SU requirements, such as bars and events.**

Other universities may have more obligation to throw events or run bars because of their lack of collegiate system, but we have observed that the expectation on the Oxford SU remains the same.

The decentralised nature of Oxford actually makes our practice harder, because it means we need to engage with multiple colleges and results in spreading resources and staff too thinly. We need to do everything 40 times, rather than the Common Rooms contributing to the costs.

**Suggestion from the floor**

Communications & Unifying:

- The SU's strength can be through its communications.
- The College Disparities Report is an example of this.
- Through consultations, we could develop a mechanism to share student stories, outside of the collegiate system. This would enable us to eliminate the 'factions' that some students feel they exist within or outside of.
- The Union could be a singular unifying entity for all students, through a unique selling point or telling a story throughout its communications.

## **Table Discussion**

**NB: Potential concepts on each topic were presented by the change director, then individual tables discussed what direction they thought should take priority for each topic.**

### **Purpose (Presented)**

- Providing individual advice and guidance for students.
- Creating spaces for students outside of their Colleges (community building).
- Providing training and support for representatives.
- Representation to the University.
- Being a parental role model for students.
- Academic policy development within the University.
- Providing spaces for representatives to collaborate.
- Ensuring that student priorities are on the University agenda.

### **Purpose (Discussion)**

- Supporting common rooms.
- Student Advice Service (brought to the floor by 2 tables).
  - o The Independent Advice service is highly valued by students, knowing someone is there to be on their side.
- Representing students where they aren't usually represented, specifically around advocating for student interests at a university level (brought to the floor by 2 tables).
- Social events and spaces with a clear SU identity should exist.
  - o The SU should run more events like concerts as this would help with image and perception, although it is also felt that right now the SU is not credible enough to run events.
- Clarity of purpose is important for positive scrutiny (how do you scrutinise what you do not understand?)

- Community building outside of Colleges is an important role.

### **Objectives (Presented)**

- Wellbeing.
- College Disparities.
- Cost of Living (including accommodation).
- Improving & increasing opportunities for representation within the Colleges & University.
- Protecting students' rights and safety.
- Local & National Representation (government policy)
- Consent & Sexual Violence.

### **Objectives (Discussion)**

- Not discussed.

### **Accountability & Scrutiny (Presented)**

- Clearer, more public information about what we are doing.
- Better communication with representatives of the Union so that they are aware.
- College based scrutiny for the SU (are we providing value for money).
- Clearer, more public information about our finances.
- Published minutes from decision-making bodies.
- Clearer, more public information about the trustee board.
- Publish impact and outcomes information.
- Votes of no confidence (better system in place regarding officers?)

### **Accountability & Scrutiny (Discussion)**

- Sabbatical Officers
  - o There needs to be better communication to the student body about what the Sabbatical Officers are doing, so that their validity isn't questioned.
  - o There is limited understanding of what the Sabbatical Officer role involves, so it's important to communicate how busy they can be.
  - o This lack of clarity is detrimental on both sides; students don't know what to criticise, and Sabbatical Officers can hypothetically exploit the lack of clarity and thus gatekeep.



- It is also important for keeping the student body informed if this relates to progress not being made if it is being blocked by the University or Colleges.
- Sabbatical Officers should be more visible in student media (maybe an OxStu column?)
- Sabbatical Officers should be at more JCR & MCR meetings, as this is one of the best ways to disseminate information.
  - This also means that the SU can reach a wider pool of people, i.e. those who are engaged but wouldn't turn up to council meetings etc.
- There needs to be better communication of SU processes (insight function needs to be implemented).
- Positive scrutiny is important.
  - Scrutiny of Sabbatical Officers should exist in a consistent and well communicated way.
  - Clarity of purpose is important for positive scrutiny.
  - It's really important that Sabbatical Officers are reporting honestly and consistently in a way that is clear and interesting to students.
- All areas of the SU need to be as transparent as possible.
  - All decisions of trustee boards should be published etc.
- A new, simplified and regular publication of SU goals and impact is needed.
  - Maybe termly.
- A clear, democratic process to challenge decisions made by the SU is needed.
- Student Council is not a psychologically safe space for Sabbatical Officers to update students as there is usually no positive response, just criticism.
- Publication of information
  - It can get published but how many students will read it?
  - Students are more interested in the actions that have taken place, rather than procedures.
  - There needs to be a reader-friendly publication of Sabbatical Officers' work.

### **Colleges/Common Rooms (Presented)**

- Focus on the things Colleges/Common Rooms can't do (and how do we go about identifying this?).
- Highlight & lessen the disparities between Colleges.
- Be the umbrella body for Common Room representation.
- Represent College students to their respective Colleges.
- Facilitate joint campaigns between Colleges and the University.
- Improve the quality of College representation.

- Facilitate cross-college communities.
- Enact Common Room policy.
- Have no connection with Common Rooms (retain absolute independence).
- Provide negotiation support for individual Common Rooms.
- Train representatives.
- Have specific SU representatives to act as a bridge between Common Rooms and the SU

### **Colleges/Common Rooms (Discussion)**

- Assisting Common Rooms to achieve policy aims is important.
- The SU should represent students where Common Rooms can't achieve change.
- The SU should be bringing unity between colleges.
- Right now the SU has low visibility in Common Rooms.
  - o Common Rooms should be more involved with the SU (or vice versa) and should be more aware of its function.
  - o Structure for JCR & MCR involvement with the SU exists, but interpersonal exchanges may help.
- International organisations have rotating positions- is this something Common Rooms could replicate with their SU representative/involvement?
  - o This would help with Colleges feeling ownership over the SU.
- SU reps should be on Common Room Committees.
- It is important that what Common Rooms really want, instead of what their delegates at Council want, is communicated.
  - o Student Council can feel quite exclusive- you have to know the rules and others' voices don't necessarily get heard.

### **Marginalised Students (Presented)**

- Centralised information for marginalised groups.
- Provide forums for marginalised communities to talk about issues affecting them.
- Build communities for minoritised students.
- Better insight/information for representatives.
- Support for existing societies.
- Provide direct representation spaces for students impacted by policy changes.
- Build networks with marginalised groups for policy development and feedback.

### **Marginalised Students (Discussion)**

- Campaigns do have an impact and are a core part of the SU, but the SU should have a broader representation of students, as well as just marginalised ones.
- Resource lists on welfare and equalities concerns should be provided (this information is very important for both students and staff).
- Communications and networking need to be improved.
- Sabbatical Officers could benefit from campaign reps to help co-chair committees, to ease the burden for Sabbatical Officers and also provide firsthand representation for marginalised voices.
  - o This should be integrated into the highest levels of the SU.

### **Political Positions (Presented)**

- Don't take positions because it will always alienate and marginalise groups.
- Take positions but only when they affect students as students.
- Take a position if you have a democratic mandate to do so.
- Take positions where it relates to holding the university accountable and standing with the students.
- Create a space to debate positions without necessarily taking on the position as an organisation.

### **Political Positions (Discussion)**

- In principle, the SU should be able to pass statements supported by the majority of the student body.
  - o Currently, the Student Council is not substantial or accountable enough.
- The SU and Student Council need a clearer mandate with checks and balances in place.
  - o Establish a two-thirds majority to pass a vote.
  - o Have a 24-hour override in place.
  - o Include a proviso that when decisions are published, it is highlighted as a Student Council decision rather than speaking on behalf of the entire student body.
- Statements from the SU are still important for solidarity, despite having a lack of impact. They remain important.
- The SU should be a place you can go to if you are not heard in Common Rooms.

### **Student Voice (Presented)**

- Where should student voice come from?

- Common Rooms
- Direct in-depth surveys
- Campaigns
- Pulse surveys
- Democratic processes (i.e. through Student Council)
- SU Officers.
- The focus should be on holding the University accountable for decisions, not providing student voice.

### **Student Voice (Discussion)**

- The student voice exists in Common Rooms.
  - Common Rooms are important for student voices, but there needs to be more accountability for Common Room participation.
  - College engagement should be mandatory.
  - Common Rooms vary democratically, and as a result, marginalised students may feel unsafe in that environment.
- JCR and MCR reps are an important source for decision making as they have been elected by a wider group within the college.
  - They could have decision-making power within the SU, maybe as a PresCom, to help with College & SU connection.
  - There should be more support for JCR and MCRs, training and lightening the load for unpaid Reps.
  - SU Reps are not well placed in Common Rooms, and the SU should be liaising with JCR and MCR Reps instead.
  - The SU should introduce a parliamentary system/student assembly that incorporates JCR and MCR Reps (and giving them decision making powers).
- Div Reps need to be better publicised (most people aren't even aware that they exist)
- The SU must reach out rather than expect people to come to them.
- The SU should be engaging with Colleges first, and the University second.
- To bring in student voices, hold a referenda where every student who wants to get involved can get involved.
  - All Student Votes are a way to bring in as many voices as possible.
- The Student Council is essential for letting engaged people be heard.
  - Different people have different awareness of the rules and space within the Student Council that exists. It needs to be made simpler and more accessible.

- Student Council needs to be a place where any student can bring something to motion with a seconder, rather than feed to through the Common Room process.
- The Student Council should be combined with PresCom.
- For Pulse Surveys to work, there needs to be clearer information and understanding.
  - NB: Some students present voiced their belief that surveys do not work.
  - Randomised survey incentives would probably not work.
  - Cash incentives work well in the Colleges (such as cash on your card to use in the College Bar)
- Campaigns are a useful tool for student voice, but general SU 'stuff' is less represented.

### **Misc. (Presented)**

- Centralisation of scattered information.
- Internalised and more impactful networks.
- Welfare.
- Making our purpose clear to the Freshers.
- Transparency and visibility.
- Having clearer goals and communicating those well.
- Institutionalised support for divisional and course reps.

### **Misc. (Discussion)**

- All Student Emails
  - They are too frequent.
  - They are usually ignored, except by student media.
- SU Social Media
  - Social media fatigue has resulted in circling back to where hard copy may work as a comms function again.
- Society engagement should be improved. Societies could be registered with the SU to heighten engagement.

### **Draft Model: A Starting Point**

NB: This is *not* the definitive plan moving forward.

- Student Ideas Platform
  - o A space for students to bring new ideas.
- Student Executive Committee
  - o To make quick decisions and direct where ideas need to be considered, when to priorities, and when to move forward.
- Conference of Common Rooms
  - o A space where Common Rooms and Div Reps join together as a deliberative force to flesh out ideas and hear consultations from Officers & the Uni.
- Taskforces
  - o Per Officer
  - o Themed around priorities
  - o Purposed to decide how to take things forward and support with representation.
- Working Groups
  - o Interested students can join a specific working group with a taskforce to contribute to the taskforce's work.
- Scrutiny Committee
  - o Responsible for scrutinising the work of the Sabbatical Officers and the Taskforces.
- All Student Meetings
  - o For organisational accountability.
- Sabbatical Officers
  - o Sabbatical Officers would be elected on the basis of their skills, experience and ability to deliver the existing priorities of the Union.
  - o Supported by taskforces.

### **Questions and concerns from the floor on seeing the draft model**

- Post transformation, it is really important to bring back all six Sabbatical Officers.
- The draft model is missing representation of marginalised students.
  - o If campaigns were to work under taskforces in this draft model, work on marginalised groups wouldn't be identity led as Sabbatical Officers may not represent the said group.
  - o In this regard, all work being headed up by Sabbatical Officers would significantly change the makeup of campaign work.
- What is the role of Campaigns within the model?

- Campaigns should be able to maintain their independence to a degree and should not be shrunk down in the Transformation period.
  - Campaigns should be involved in the review of changes.
- Will people be elected based on experience?
- The starting point draft model includes many different bodies- it is a complicated structure to be introduced all at once after such a difficult period. How will it come together? What powers will each body have and how will they exercise these powers?
- How are the priorities going to be set?
- Sabbatical Officers are currently only in position for a year- is there any consideration about Officers standing for re-election?
- The structural issues in this draft model mean that there are seemingly many barriers for change. There is no guarantee that students will stick to these proper channels.
  - Adding extra layers of structure may max out those involved capacity as volunteers.
- Will there be some existing structures in Michaelmas to allow students to shape what the SU will eventually look like?
- What safeguards are in place to make sure these changes are solidified?

Student feedback and input is integral to the success of the transformation plan. If you have any concerns, questions or feedback after reading this report, please submit them via [this form!](#)