

Briefing on changing Union Affairs Officer role to President

Union Executive, December 2023

History and Context

From 1903-1977 the Students' Union had an elected student President. In 1975 the position was abolished and after that, the leadership of the Union was shared across the Sabbatical roles.

Since the Students' Union became a registered charity, it has had a legal requirement to have a Chair of its Board of Trustees. This role has many of the characteristics of a Union President with responsibilities including chairing Board meetings, managing the Union's relationship with the Provost, and line managing the Chief Executive. For a number of years, this role rotated at each meeting between the Sabbatical Officers. However, this was found to be unworkable and led to confusion and a lack of clear direction and strategy, as well as a lack of clarity in who was responsible for managing key external relationships as well as not being in line with good governance practice. For some years, the role was then selected by the Sabbatical Officers after the election period. However, this led to challenges, as the decision was often made in the first few weeks of the year when the team was still forming, causing divisions in the team at the start of their term of office, and without full consideration of the implications of the decision.

The Sabbatical Officer structure was last reviewed as part of a democracy review which took place in the 2020-21 academic year. Our current iteration of six Sabbatical Officers has been in place since then. Feedback received from students as part of the review raised concerns that the role of Chair of the Board of Trustees should be chosen by students rather than by the Sabbatical Officers. The Sabbatical Officers also were concerned about the practice of the role being chosen by them at the start of their term of office, which was creating tensions within the newly formed team.

As a result, in 2022-23 the Sabbatical Officers decided to permanently fix the Chair of the Board to the Union Affairs Officer to create more certainty, transparency and a more democratic process. The responsibilities of the Union Affairs Officer now closely mirror those that in many other SUs are called Union President.

The Union has received frequent feedback that students would have more influence on UCL decision-making if the Union had a President. This would also increase the standing of the role externally helping to increase influence for our members at national level. This would support the delivery of the Union's strategy to have effective influence in national policymaking.

Some concerns have been raised that introducing a President could lead to a more hierarchical Sabbatical Officer team structure which could create divisions in the team. However, this proposal has sought to safeguard against this by ensuring that, as in many other Students' Unions, the President would be an equal officer in the team with equal decision-making power, whilst also having clear and distinct responsibilities. This would also be consistent with charity law, where all trustees have an equal role in decision-making.

National Benchmarking

There is varied practice across Students' Unions when it comes to their Sabbatical Officer structures. However, the vast majority have a President. The table below provides an overview of how the President / Union Affairs Officer, or their recognised equivalent at other Russell Group Students' Unions is titled.

Title	Frequency
President	17
President (UG) and President (PG)	1
Union Affairs Officer	3
Union Affairs and Communications Officer	1
General Secretary	1
Union Development Officer	1

71% of Russell Group Students' Unions have a President as part of their Sabbatical Officer portfolio. This is not to say that these are the most effective structures for representing students; however, it does show that the proposal is in line with other Students' Unions.

Most of the other large student unions/organisations around the world also have an elected student President for their Students' Unions, for example Harvard, Princeton, Sydney, Toronto etc..

Considerations

The Union Executive needs to consider how the change will be viewed by the wider student body and by UCL stakeholders. Previous consultation indicated that students would like to have more say over who chairs the Union's Board of Trustees. Consultation has also previously shown strong UCL support for this change.

Due care and consideration needs to be given prior to nominations opening for the Leadership Race to communicate the change. The communication needs to explain the distinct responsibilities of each of the Sabbatical Officer roles and also include the continuation of a non-hierarchical structure and equal decision-making responsibilities across the team.

This change is likely to be positively received by UCL. It will provide further evidence of the Union's improvement journey which has been important in attracting much more investment from UCL which is enabling us to expand services for students.

Next Steps

The Union will communicate with its members that this change has been made and it will come into effect for the purposes of the elections in the 2024 Leadership Race. The Sabbatical Officers will also communicate this change with key stakeholders within UCL.