

Officer Trustee Communications

1.0 Introduction

- 1.1 This paper will discuss existing messaging and communication strategies relating to our Officer Trustees, as a team and as individual roles. Through discussions with roleholders and reflection on existing communication tactics, a strategic approach to framing and communicating these roles is developed and proposed.

2.0 Background

- 2.1 Our Officer Trustee team are Imperial College Union's most prominent figures. They sit at the heart of a diverse network of student activities that engage over 2,500 volunteers and many thousands of participants. They are the most recognisable 'faces' of the organisation, interacting with student volunteers and senior College staff directly on a daily basis, and are also heavily featured in media and publicity.
- 2.2 Each year, the Officer Trustee team are supported at the very start of their term in office to generate both an individual and a collective set of priorities for their year. This work takes in their manifesto pledges, personal experiences and priorities, and is intended to frame their work and assist prioritisation and self-management throughout their year – with support from senior managers and members of the Board. However, these priorities are not always coherently packaged and communicated to our members throughout each academic year.
- 2.3 In advance of the March elections each year, marketing messages are chosen that are intended to explain the Officer Trustee team, and each role within it, to encourage students to put themselves forward as candidates. Some of this messaging focuses on what current and previous Officer Trustees have achieved; however in previous years, a significant proportion of the messaging has been an explanation of the responsibilities of each role as defined in regulations.
- 2.4 In March 2016, the elections messaging was modified to centre notions of professional development and leadership experience for the individual to a greater extent than before, as part of a new messaging emphasis on the unique professional development opportunities that an Officer Trustee role would offer the role holder. This new focus was in addition to existing messages about the influence and responsibilities of each role.
- 2.5 The roles were compared to graduate recruitment schemes, with the intention of engaging students by appealing directly to their career and professional aspirations – positioning an Officer Trustee role as an accelerated and challenging start to a professional career, rather than an opportunity to take up for a year before beginning a career proper.
- 2.6 To my knowledge, a specific plan that sets out a framework for how the Officer Trustees are to be communicated to our members and stakeholders – that sets out not just their activities and priorities for that year, but their values, personal backgrounds, and their

reasons for taking up their role, as well as the opportunities the role provides – has not been written in previous years.

3.0 The importance of communicating Officer Trustees effectively

- 3.1 As mentioned above, Officer Trustee roles are crucial not only to the direction and priorities of Imperial College Union, but how our members perceive our role and successes.
- 3.2 We are already aware of existing preconceptions, including negative ones, held by some students regarding Officer Trustee roles. These included perceptions – often contradictory – of ineffectiveness, careerism, the role being hard and thankless, the role being an ‘easy ride’, roleholders being in the pocket of College, roleholders being posturing protestors rather than creating real change, and so on.
- 3.3 There are also recurring misconceptions about the responsibilities each role has – for example, DPW candidates discussing CSP room bookings – or pledges that are repeated each year, such as reducing entry fees or increasing funding to societies, which do not reflect the work done on those issues by past and current Officer Trustee teams.
- 3.4 Several Officer Trustees felt that they had been ‘blown off course’ during October and November, and that they were finding it a challenge to identify and prioritise the work and projects that would be most effective in helping them achieve the goals that they had identified in August. Some also said that they did not feel that their work and achievements so far this year were understood by our membership.
- 3.5 Several Officer Trustees commented that the discussion that took part during the writing of this paper - covering their values and personal aspirations, as well as a reflection on why they originally ran for the role – was enjoyable and refreshing. Such conversations and reflection could be supported by an agreed method for embedding the communications plan into their meetings with their SMG contact and with other close colleagues, as well as during Officer Trustee catchups.
- 3.6 After my conversations with Officer Trustees and colleagues, it became clear that an Officer Trustee team communication plan would not just give extra context and content to our Marketing team, but would help the Officer Trustees themselves, and colleagues they work closely with, by providing a framework through which they can prioritise their ongoing work.
- 3.7 Reviews of election cycles in March have indicated that there is a relationship between the prominence of an Officer Trustee – the awareness of the student body of their role, priorities and impact – and the number and breadth of candidates to succeed them. As it is an institutional priority to grow the engagement of our members with our democratic processes, it is therefore important to consider how we can manage the communication around each Officer Trustee to improve public awareness of the role, the individual currently holding it, and the work they are undertaking, in order to improve the ‘pipeline’ of prospective candidates for each position as well as the turnout

in future elections.

4.0 Discussions with Officer Trustees

4.1 I have met each Officer Trustee individually to discuss how they would like their role, their achievements and their own self to be represented in communication with stakeholders.

4.2 The discussion was based around the following general questions, each of which was delved into quite deeply. The Officer Trustees were challenged not just to name their values or priorities, for example, but to reflect on why their answer was important to them, and where it came from.

4.2.1 Imagine a student opens an ICU newsletter email on February 20, 2017. They see that it is from you, and your name, role and image are at the top. What do you want them to think when they see you?

4.2.2 What personal qualities would you like to project through your communications?

4.2.3 What do you want people to think about the role you are currently undertaking?

4.2.4 What successes and current projects do you want to highlight, and why?

4.2.5 What topics would you like to be discussed by the candidates to succeed you in March 2017?

4.3 The results of these discussions with each Officer Trustee are shown at the end of this paper.

5.0 Findings

5.1 As expected, there were values and messages that all or most Officer Trustees had in common – such as approachability, effectiveness and friendliness, or emphasising that they were working hard for the benefit of students.

5.2 Deeper messages began to emerge as well, which provide useful talking points not only for how each individual and their current role should be communicated – as intended – but also how the Officer Trustee team itself should be understood and conceptualised.

5.3 A notable feature of the discussions was how certain messages, held in common by multiple Officer Trustees, were direct refutations of existing preconceptions about their roles. For example, several OTs emphasised the importance of telling students that the projects they were working on involved long-term changes, which may not affect current students at all – and further, attempting to justify the value of long-term thinking. This was then connected to perceptions that Officer Trustees were inactive or ineffective; almost every Officer Trustee wants to simultaneously be seen as a ‘do-er’

who fixes problems for students straight away, but who is also working on strategic challenges such as sustainable club budgeting, student mental health, White City or the quality of coursework feedback.

- 5.4 These two messages can be reconciled, and can in fact be cast as manifestations of a deeper message about change-making and influence; however the strength of feeling about this perception emphasises the importance of developing strong messages around Officer Trustees that directly challenge and delegitimise existing misconceptions.
- 5.5 Discussions around the topics that each current Officer Trustee would like to see debated during the next March Elections reflected that manifestos and campaign promises were often 'lagging' what had been achieved already – either promising things that had already been achieved, or repeating proposals from previous years that had already been accepted or rejected. Candidates were also felt to have a relatively superficial understanding of the achievement of previous Officer Trustee teams, a challenge that can be tackled both through improved communication and candidate support.
- 5.6 The findings of the Officer Trustee conversations, including cross-cutting themes and misconceptions to be tackled, are shown in the accompanying paper.

6.0 Recommendations

- 6.1 We establish a core set of messages regarding the Officer Trustee team that are relatively independent of the roleholders each year – messages which reflect the nature of the roles themselves, explaining how the roles came to be, the long-term successes for which they are responsible, and the benefits of taking up the role.
 - 6.1.1 These messages can be focused differently for different stakeholder groups, using the stakeholder analysis already in development for use across the organisation. These messages should also directly address the known misconceptions held by parts of the student body regarding the Officer Trustees.
 - 6.1.2 These messages should be used as guidance during key communication challenges that cover the whole Officer Trustee team, such as Welcome Week, Impact Reports, and end-of-year publicity.
 - 6.1.3 A particular focus should be put on effective communication in the pre-election period and during nominations, with one set of messages focusing on conversion of wavering potential candidates, and a different set of messages during voting, to increase turnout.
 - 6.1.4 A messaging plan for the Officer Trustee team should be **agreed by the end of December 2016**. In future, these should be agreed by the end of August each year.

- 6.2 Common and simple personal qualities held in common by multiple Officer Trustees, such as *approachability, friendliness* and *effectiveness*, should be generated at the start of each year, and used as guidelines when communications such as social media, all-student emails or volunteer mailings are being planned.
- 6.2.1 A draft of this plan for the current Officer Trustee team is included in the accompanying paper, **to be agreed by the end of December 2016**. In future, these should be agreed by the end of August each year.
- 6.3 Each Officer Trustee should be supported in generating a set of desired communications outcomes alongside their priorities for the year, which brings together their personal values, their priorities and intended achievements, and how they would like their role to be perceived.
- 6.3.1 Consideration should be given to creating an outline 'message calendar' for each term, of Officer Trustee achievements and related communications. This could be drawn up jointly by the Officer Trustee and Marketing teams together to plan publicity around Officer Trustee successes.
- 6.3.2 A draft of this plan for the current Officer Trustee team is included in the accompanying paper, **to be agreed by the end of December 2016**. In future, these should be agreed by the end of August each year.
- 6.4 Officer Trustees should be given an opportunity to contribute to the framing and promotion of their roles in March elections. They should also be given a role in planning any communication to students who are likely to consider an Officer Trustee role, while protecting the integrity of the election process.
- 6.4.1 **This process should be completed by the end of January 2017**, with an Officer Trustee-specific communication strand agreed as part of the wider Elections communication plan.
- 6.5 Elections communication regarding the employability benefits of an Officer Trustee role should be written with input from current and past Officer Trustees.
- 6.5.1 This should be reflected in the above plan, **for completion by the end of January 2017**.
- 6.6 Officer Trustees and their SMG contacts should discuss how to communicate and frame their achievements during their regular catchups, as well as referring to the original plans created by the Officer Trustee team in August.
- 6.6.1 This should be reiterated to Officer Trustees and the Strategic Management Group by the President and MD, **by the end of January 2017**.