Regional Assembly Structures in England

Project Definition

Background

1. The Open University Student Association (OUSA) has around 200,000 members spread across the home nations, Europe and elsewhere across the globe. For the past five years, local representation in England has been organized through assemblies, which mapped across onto the Open University’s regional structure. All Open University (OU) students in England are members of a Regional Assembly (RA): each assembly has an Executive, members of which are elected by students from the region. There is variation in the make-up, constitution and impact of these Executives.

2. With the University changing its regional delivery structure and centralising much of its service delivery, it is timely for OUSA to review the structure of regional assemblies in England.

Terms of Reference

3. SUMS Consulting was asked:

“To review the regional assembly structure in England to determine if it is fit for purpose and to make recommendations for improvement or propose an alternative model.”

Approach

4. The approach taken combined a number of different research methodologies:
   a. Desk research
   b. Semi-structured interviews with OU, OUSA and comparator representatives
   c. Online Student Consultative Forum
   d. Survey and Focus Group with Regional Assembly Executive members
   e. Workshop with CEC.

5. The research was undertaken between September and November 2015.

6. A Working Group made up of representatives of OUSA and OUSA staff was created to facilitate research streams and discuss research outputs.

7. A paper was drafted by SUMS Consulting and discussed by the Working Group in December 2015.

OUSA Decision Making

8. This paper will be presented to CEC by the VP Student Representation in January 2016.

9. CEC will discuss the options contained therein and identify their preferred option.
10. OUSA Representatives and staff will identify the required constitutional changes and prepare papers to reflect these changes in advance of Conference 2016.

11. Conference will consider the constitutional changes in summer 2016.

12. Changes will become effective for the 2016/17 academic year.

**Current Structure**

13. Every English OU student automatically becomes a member of an RA, which depends upon their location. There are 10 RAs in England, reflecting the regional structure of the OU at the time at which the structure was introduced.

14. RAs are constitutionally responsible primarily for representing the students within that region (to OU, OUSA and other HE Sector Bodies), defining regional OUSA policy and appointing students to represent OUSA on OU regional committees. Secondary responsibilities for RAs include recruiting volunteers for OU events within the region, supporting local OUSA groups, arranging events and recruiting volunteers.

15. Each RA is managed by an Executive (RAE) consisting of at most 10 students (elected by members of RA for a one year period) and the Student Association Representative (SAR) responsible for that Region. RAEs are able to nominate delegates for OUSA Conference.

16. Students who wish to vote in RAE elections must register their interest in the Electoral Register. Voting is both positive and negative in nature.

17. Students who wish to stand for election must put themselves forward for annual elections in November each year. Should an RA fail to elect sufficient members for its RAE, it may hold casual vacancy mid-term elections or request an additional casual vacancy election at another point in the year to appoint members for the remainder of that year.

18. The constitution makes no reference to co-opting members of RAEs though several RAEs have done this with the approval of VP Administration.

19. The constitution does not prescribe roles for RAEs however OUSA has mandated the nomination of a finance contact for the purpose of disbursement of funding. OUSA makes available an annual grant to each RAE based on the number of students in the Region and geographical size. Funding is not retained by the RAE, but is absorbed by OUSA if not used.

20. A budget of £6.4k was made available to the RAEs in 2014-15 to support delivery of regional activities. This represents less than 0.5% of OUSA’s annual income.

21. There are currently five SAR positions for England, each SAR responsible for representing two collocated regions. The SAR election process takes place in the six weeks prior to the biennial OUSA Conference; SARs are elected for a period of two years. The constitution makes no reference to the responsibilities of SARs.

**Comments on Effectiveness**

22. There are no longer regional policies or regional policy interpretations for OU or OUSA or other English HE sector bodies. OU no longer has a structure of regional consultative committees. Thus one of the primary purposes of RAs and their management bodies has disappeared.
23. Members of executives feel that effectiveness of executive structures is directly related to the number of students engaged with the executive through election or co-option.

24. The election process requires significant staff support and yet acts as a barrier to inclusion.

25. The current structure is poorly populated:
   a. 36 out of 100 places were filled on RAEs at the end of the 2014/15 electoral year (29 in 2013/14) (this ranged from 0 to 6 in 2014/15 with four RAEs having 5 or more members).
   b. RAEs used 33% of the grant funding made available to them across England in 2014/15 (this ranged from 0% to 97%).
   c. 5 regions were active in nominating delegates for Conference
   d. 3 SARs were elected in 2014 (out of 5 positions), 2 were filled throughout 2014/15, 1 SAR remains in post in 2015/16.
   e. 3,659 students in England (around 3% of those eligible) registered to vote in regional assembly elections in November 2015. Of these 10% used their ballot with numbers ranging from 21 in one region to 61 in another. For comparison purposes, 22% of voters who registered for English SAR elections returned their ballots.

Conclusions

26. The current structure does not meet its constitutional purpose, nor does it motivate sufficient interest in the wider student body to ensure it is replete.

Emergent Purpose

Findings

27. Research identified a number of emergent purposes for regional structures in England:
   a. Representation of student views within OUSA structures
   b. Dissemination of information to wider student population
   c. Running and promoting social events
   d. Recruitment of student activists for OUSA roles
   e. Recruitment of volunteers for OU, OUSA and HE Sector Events
   f. Raising awareness of existence of and services delivered by OUSA.

Comments on Effectiveness

28. The extent to which the current structures deliver emergent purposes differs by region with an anecdotal correlation between the effectiveness of a particular RAE and the number of members (either elected or co-opted).

29. The lack of filled SAR roles in England significantly reduces the ability of RAs and RAEs to fulfil emergent representation and information dissemination purposes identified above. It increases the responsibility of the VP Representation for representation, information dissemination and support and reduces the effectiveness of the current OUSA structure. Conference voted in 2014 to reduce the number of SAR positions from five to three, but it is not clear how those three roles would relate to regions.
One of the implications of recent changes that the OU have made (fee structures, rigorous application of curriculum pathways etc.) is that the average life cycle for an undergraduate degree is likely to be between six and seven years. This is likely to reduce the length of time student activists are available to move through the OUSA representative cycle from RAE member through to President. It may also reduce the cumulative experience of OUSA representatives.

Conclusions

31. The current structure does not meet its emergent purposes in a consistent manner, nor does it ensure the quantity and quality of student activists for required for future election to OUSA positions.

32. The status quo with current levels of recruitment is not fit for either constitutional or emergent purpose.

Options for Future Structures

Future Purpose

33. Over the course of the research, it has become apparent that the future purpose of any local or regional structure in England should be influenced by the requirement for local or regional delivery of services provided by OUSA to its members.

34. Those purposes can be summarised as:
   a. Democracy (including the representation of student views within OUSA structures, the dissemination of decision making information to the wider student population and the recruitment of future OUSA officers)
   b. Community (including the creation of a wider student community for OU students, societies and small scale events)
   c. Volunteering (including the recruitment of volunteers for OU, OUSA and HE Sector events)
   d. Awareness (building awareness of OUSA and its services across the wider student body).

35. The following options are put forward for future structures for local and regional delivery with commentary made on their ability to deliver against the purposes identified above, their requirement for support from OUSA staff, their requirement for financial resource and their ability to motivate students to engage.
   a. Improved Status Quo
   b. Larger Geographic Regions
   c. Mixed Model – Faculty & Local Structures
   d. OUSA Embedded.

36. The Working Group recommends the adoption of option C.

37. A table summarising the options is available at the end of this section.
Option A – Improved Status Quo

38. This option retains 10 regions across England. Regions are assigned to one of three SARs according to location and the relationship is finessed based on student numbers.

39. The number of elected executive positions remains at 10 with the requirement to co-opt members onto the executive should the number of elected members be insufficient.

40. A significant push to increase awareness of regions and executives should be conducted in 2016 with a large recruitment drive timed to increase the number of members standing for election to executives for 2016/17.

41. If an SAR role is unfilled or inactive for any period of time an interim SAR could be appointed from one of the executives within that territory. If there is a significant time period before the next Conference (≥12 months), a casual vacancy election should be held under current regulations to fill that position; otherwise the interim will be appointed for a term up until Conference.

42. Comments on Purpose Delivery
   a. Democracy – Fully populated with an appropriate calendar of meetings, this structure enables democracy and representation of OU students in England
   b. Community – This structure is formal in nature and not considered inclusive by all OUSA members. Community building events can be arranged through the structure
   c. Volunteering – The structure is capable of delivering volunteers as demonstrated by active regions but is linked to the engagement levels of the executive
   d. Awareness – This structure does not facilitate increased awareness of OUSA in comparison with other structures and activities.

43. Advantages
   + Spend on regional activities through RAEs remains low in comparison to income.

44. Disadvantages
   – If there are no significant changes in recruitment to the structure it will not be able to deliver against its objectives: Democracy, Community, Volunteering and Awareness.

45. Risks
   – There is a significant risk that any recruitment drive will fail, leading to further disillusionment with the structure. OUSA will have lost a good opportunity to build on the momentum and engagement gained through the consultative process.

Option B – Larger Geographic Regions

46. This option merges the current English regions to create three large territories. The number of elected positions on regions will be set at 8 in line with national assembly executives in the nations. Similar constitutional support will be made for co-opted members of executives for Regions as for Nations.
47. Regions are assigned to one SAR. The SAR is responsible for representing that territory within the structures of OUSA. The SAR remains an elected position lasting for two years.

48. Comments on Purpose Delivery:
   a. Democracy – Fully populated with an appropriate calendar of meetings, this structure enables democracy and representation of OU students in England
   b. Community – This structure is formal in nature and there is a larger gap between the structure and any local student experience. Whilst events could be arranged through the structure, it may prove difficult to provide a breadth of activity across such a large geographical area with fewer executive members to drive activity
   c. Volunteering – The ability of the executive to recruit and maintain a register of volunteers will be dependent on the networks of the individuals on the executive. The geographical span may limit the reach of executive members
   d. Awareness - This structure does not facilitate increased awareness of OUSA in comparison with other structures and activities.

49. Advantages:
   + Fewer volunteers are required to staff the structure
   + Grant funding streams could be merged, enabling larger events to be organised, attracting students from across the territory
   + Funding for regional activities will not increase significantly, with funding expected to remain at 2015/16 levels.

50. Disadvantages:
   - The structure is large with structures spanning a large geographical region so face to face meetings will be difficult to arrange; there are concerns relating to continued engagement of students and effectiveness of regions as a forum for representation without face to face contact
   - The responsibility of SARs in comparison to FARs is not clear within this structure.

51. Risks:
   - The larger regions are “too far away” from students’ local experience and engagement with the structure suffers as a result.

Option C – Mixed Model – Faculty & Local Structures

52. Democratic structures are closely tied to academic delivery structures with an additional “Faculty” specifically for the Open degree. Members within each Faculty would elect Faculty Association Representatives (FARs), up to nine in total. The FAR would be responsible for collating the views of students and would convene online meetings of Programme Representatives.
53. Programme Representatives (PRs) would be appointed by OUSA; students interested in taking up a position would apply each Spring for an appointment which would cover one academic year starting from the following August. This is a separate structure from Central Representatives which are appointed to central OU governance structures.

54. FARs and PRs would be in place from August to prepare OUSA online inductions/welcomes mirroring Freshers’ activities in traditional institutions.

55. A National Executive would be constituted for England in similar constitutional terms to Ireland, Scotland and Wales, with the ten members in addition to the English SARs. There will be no regional assembly structure beneath this. One member will be elected per English Region, although members can be co-opted.

56. Members of the National Executive structures would be responsible for providing support to students in their area to set up local groups, to volunteer and to signpost students to OUSA services.

57. Local structures would exist on an informal basis akin to current constitutional idea of a group. OUSA would create a series of resources for groups which could be set up by 3 or more students from a locality with a shared interest. Groups would run social activities.

58. OUSA keeps a register of volunteers; students who volunteer for OU Student Consultative Panels are asked to register but any student can register online.

59. Comments on Purpose Delivery:
   a. Democracy – The OU makes policy decisions affecting English students through its Faculty Structure and through its central executive and governance structures. The SST structures are likely to report through the Faculty structure. Thus aligning representative structures with OU structures is more likely to enable OUSA to influence future policy making.
   b. Community – This is met separately from the democratic purpose. Community would be created through module groupings and through local groups.
   c. Volunteering – A register of volunteers engages students who wish to offer a lower level of commitment to OUSA and therefore provides OUSA an opportunity to engage with a wider range of students.
   d. Awareness – Faculty and Programme representatives work through module forums to raise awareness of OUSA and what is does for the student body. OUSA sets up an OUSA Local Directory with details of local groups which can be searched by students.

60. Advantages:
   + Democratic structures exist reflecting the structures through which policy linked to student experience of academic delivery can be influenced
   + Students who are motivated to engage in democracy and representation can do so separately from those who are motivated to engage socially
   + An informal structure for local groups allows flexibility in group shared interest; large urban areas could support a network of shared interest groups, whilst rural areas might support just one general OUSA group.

61. Disadvantages:
- Group service delivery would be inconsistent, depending on the motivation of local students to get involved and run them
- Costs associated with OUSA local service delivery are expected to increase, though these may be indirect rather than direct costs. Increased staff resource will be required to create advice and guidance for FARs and students wishing to set up local groups.
- OUSA would be dependent on the OU Consultative Structures to ensure sufficient specific consultation with English students.

62. Risks:
- Faculty Association Representatives are pulled away from OUSA into the Faculty Structures of the OU.

Option D – OUSA Embedded in Curriculum Delivery

63. This option seeks to embed OUSA within the curriculum delivery structures of the OU as a service delivery partner to Faculties, with OUSA delivering key student engagement activities on behalf of the OU as well as its democratic function.

64. Each Module would have a module instance representative that would represent the views of students on that module. Module representatives would be appointed by OUSA. Module representatives would be used as a consultative group by OU staff within SST structures in Faculties.

65. Student education materials would embed OUSA branding as well as OU branding to raise awareness. This could be done by the addition of the OUSA logo to front pages and a page within the presentation template used by tutors. Students on modules which have physical book distributions would receive an OUSA leaflet as part of this distribution. OUSA volunteers would be welcomed at face to face study events.

66. Raised awareness of OUSA and the concept of a group would lead to increased numbers of local OUSA groups, delivering engagement and retention activities. These could be based around curriculum, location or other shared interest grouping.

67. Comments on Purpose Delivery:
   a. Democracy – OUSA would retain its democratic outlook, but with increased awareness, could expect increased numbers of students engaged in the democratic processes
   b. Community – Groups, both virtual and physical, would deliver an increased feeling of community across the OU membership with a greater feeling of belonging and pride
   c. Volunteering – Increased awareness is expected to deliver an increase in the number of student volunteering for OUSA
   d. Awareness – This will significantly increase the awareness of OUSA.

68. Advantages:
   + Significantly increased awareness of OUSA as an organisation
+ Increased quality of partnership between OUSA, OU and Faculty decision makers would increase confidence in the ability of OUSA to deliver its consultative structure both from all perspectives.

69. Disadvantages:

− Increased awareness will bring increased pressure on service delivery as more students look to OUSA for those services. Increased funding may be required to support this but OUSA should consider the efficiency and effectiveness of service delivery under a different load
− OU and related Faculty decision makers will only invest in OUSA if OUSA is able to build confidence in its ability to deliver engagement and representation.

70. Risks:

− OU does not recognise OUSA’s capability and capacity to deliver enhanced student experience and does not offer OUSA the opportunity to embed offering within OU delivery activities
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Objective</th>
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<th>B – Larger Regions</th>
<th>C – Mixed Faculty Structure</th>
<th>D - Embedded</th>
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<td>Cost Benefit Statement</td>
<td>Low cost, low benefit structure which causes frustrations to both staff and students. Increased investment in recruitment activities may yield increased benefits but this is not guaranteed.</td>
<td>Low cost, low benefit structure. Represents an appropriate cost point based on current engagement levels.</td>
<td>Whilst this model would have increased cost of support, it is more likely to delivery higher levels of benefits to OUSA and OU.</td>
<td>Whilst delivering significantly higher benefits to OUSA, this structure has higher costs. Greater numbers of students are likely to seek service delivery through OUSA.</td>
</tr>
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<td>Key Risk</td>
<td>Lack of engagement in structure.</td>
<td>Regions “too far away” reducing engagement.</td>
<td>FAR representation model pulled away from OUSA intoOU model.</td>
<td>Requirement for OUSA to deliver enhanced student engagement.</td>
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Supporting Recommendations

71. Consideration of the following recommendations should be independent of the options identified above. They will hold irrespective of option chosen.

72. Forum for communication purposes - Each congregation of students, whether based on geography, curriculum or shared interest, should have access to a forum (private rather than public) for communication purposes. This should be set up and maintained in such a way as to allow staff access for support, but not so that forums are directed by staff. This will allow staff to respond to issues raised within the forum and to monitor appropriate forum use.

73. Spring Elections - OUSA should move elections for positions such as Regional or Faculty Association Representatives to late spring. This will ensure that positions are filled in good time to allow planning for events and meetings to coincide with an influx of new students in September and October. This will also allow new representatives to attend Conference increasing knowledge of OUSA and its structures. Scheduling a new representative training session (but attended by all such representatives) at Conference would increase expertise and engagement within this cohort of volunteers.

74. Automatic Voting Rights - OUSA should move away from separate member and electoral registers and combine them with the right to vote in elections an automatic prerogative of membership.

75. Reconsider Number of SARs/FARs - OUSA should consider the number of SAR roles required for England as part of the constitutional change. If student numbers remain in their current ratio, three SARs for England may continue to reflect the importance of representation.

76. OUSA Volunteer - OUSA should consider a formal role of Volunteer which could be conferred on members who undertook activities for the Association, for example representing the association at a study day. Forum respondents recommended a free hoodie as both a reward and branding device enabling OUSA members to recognise Volunteers and approach them.

77. Use of Grants - OUSA should clarify grant availability, activities which grant funding supports and the accountability of Executive structures for that funding.