The CEC is asked to:-

i) note this report

ii) discuss themes identified from members’ feedback

iii) recommend actions to enhance CEC effectiveness

1. Introduction/Background

1.1 The CEC Effectiveness Review is an ongoing conversation with the objective to better understand CEC members’ needs and improve the support we offer them. To this end, a survey was carried out from 1 to 9 March in 2016.

1.2 The survey invited members’ feedback on various aspects of the CEC meetings and received 8 responses with very considered feedback. The themes from this feedback are discussed in the sections below. These include easing time pressures, improving communications, skills development and raising awareness of the Association’s activities.

1.3 A recommendation from the feedback received was to carry the discussion forward in a face-to-face meeting. Thus, the sections that follow include points for further discussion at the CEC meeting scheduled from 18 to 20 March. The outcomes from this discussion will inform how we develop plans to enhance support.

2. Rewarding aspects of the role

All respondents said that they had broadly enjoyed their CEC role during the 2014-2016 term. Aspects such as working collaboratively with fellow CEC members and helping improve the student experience were highlighted, and two respondents also commented on increased confidence on a personal level.
Respondents also felt that their views were valued; two responses specifically complimented the chairing of the CEC meetings, and felt that they had been offered the opportunity to voice their views.

Respondents identified the following aspects that they found most rewarding:

- Opportunity to meet both fellow students and University staff
- Working collaboratively with other students
- Supporting local activities and events, and fostering wider involvement with the Association’s activities.
- Being able to contribute to policy decisions and thereby the student experience
- Gaining a better understanding of how the Association’s activities relate to those of the University.

“Professionally in my daily work, it makes me that little bit more confident and self-assured all the time.”

“Working together to try and make a difference, improving the experience of members.”

“Most rewarding – seeing how the university seems to respond positively to what we say/do and how much more they seem to value the student voice.”

“Collaborative decision making”.

The following sections discuss members’ feedback on ways to enhance the effectiveness of the CEC.

3. **Feedback on enhancing the effectiveness of the CEC**

3.1 **Easing time pressures**

Respondents identified time constraints as a major factor that influences their ability to participate in activities such as discussing CEC papers on online forums. Reading and discussing the papers demand considerable time commitment; seven respondents said that they read the papers before the meetings and three regularly explored background information around the subject under discussion, but only one specified that they discussed the CEC papers on the forums.

“I rarely discuss the papers before the meeting as often I am reading them as I travel to the meeting or in the few days before the meeting. Depending on the topic I sometimes try to read older papers relating to the subject to remind myself of the history of the project but I find there is not an easy way to search for this.”

3.2 **Discussion point**

In what ways could we ease the time pressures on CEC members?
4 Improving communication

4.1 In terms of communication, there seems to be a need for balancing the use of various communication channels with keeping members informed of the Association’s activities. On the one hand, responses touched on the use of multiple channels for communication like social media and forums, each of which requires investment of time on a daily basis. On the other hand, members who are not directly involved in the projects being discussed need additional background information to enable them to participate in discussions.

4.2 Respondents also commented on the need for better facilitation of virtual meetings, and the potential benefits of receiving regular updates about projects that Association staff and fellow CEC members are working on.

“As a lot of meetings during working hours for myself I haven’t been able to contribute as much as I would like.”

“don’t understand why we don’t have discussions online as well as face-to-face…we may have more time if it might turn into a lengthy discussion.”

“a ‘state of play summary’ of where all current initiatives are”

“We need to find a better system for sharing information between CEC members between CEC meetings. For example, a fortnightly/monthly update from students involved on different projects would be helpful (although this would be creating extra work).”

4.3 Discussion points

? What are the formats that members could use to offer updates to fellow student representatives on the CEC?
? Would CEC members need extra support in producing these updates?

5 Ensuring better understanding of University structures

5.1 Responses touched on the need to understand the remits of different committees within the University and how their work impacts the student experience. This would enable members to identify issues of particular relevance to students.

“A thorough explanation of the OU’s governance structure and where OUSA feeds into it would be very long overdue...For new officers I would strongly advise work with your particular staff liaison and don’t be scared to delegate some tasks to the SARs/FARs.”

“I think a clear outlining of CEC role within OUSA and its clear objectives for the interests of the students and how it works in connection with the OUSA office and getting its decisions across to the University’s relevant governance bodies, faculties etc.”
5.2 In a reference to the November dinner with OU staff, one response placed emphasis on networking opportunities:

“I do find this dinner a bit too formal. I would much prefer the opportunity for a more relaxed event with opportunities to circulate more and meet more staff.”

5.3 Responses also touched on the need for a clearer definition of what each CEC role involves, and how it translates into day-to-day activities.

“I would have found it useful to have more time with the previous post holder at the handover weekend...what was actually involved in the day to day role.”

5.4 Discussion points

- What kind of activities would offer CEC members better networking opportunities?
- What aspects of the CEC roles would you like to have specified in more detail?

6 Skills development

6.1 Responses touched on the necessity of developing a wide range of skills, such as personal time management, engaging with forum discussions, managing email communication, and communicating effectively during meetings.

“These to be made as podcasts etc. and pinned to the top of the CEC forum resources...a handbook or something with the office staff and the OU structure...face-to-face protocols of meetings (e.g., star a paper)...even a calendar of basic OUSA events, e.g., CEC, SRG, Degree ceremonies, Resi schools, Freshers...”

6.2 Discussion point

- Which skills would you like to have more training for?

7 Raising student awareness of the Association’s activities

Respondents commented on positive changes such as the OU Students Magazine and the Association’s website reaching out to the wider student body. However, there were concerns regarding the best way to consolidate student opinion, such as noting student opinion through various channels and feeding that back into the CEC. Some responses also stressed on the need to keep the student body better informed of University policies that impact their study experience.

“I think we have been moving away from the formal Regional structure in line with the OU’s reorganisation but we could provide a framework for local initiatives though I suspect these are more likely to be social than anything...We are better at seeing student feedback via things such as social media than we were in the past. But in many ways we have been spread quite thinly and not really able to capitalise on this. I would hope an increased
number of SARs/FARs in post along with other proposed volunteer posts might help in this.”

“I would like to see much more content on our webpage about governance and how we help to inform OU policy, how students can engage with us (and the OU) and how they can give feedback about any aspect of their experience...Students need to have a better way to search for news items and resources on the website so that we can track how a particular issue has developed over time for example by using tags.”

7.1 As respondents emphasised the need for more clarity on how different channels are being used to strengthen the student voice, the importance of face-to-face communication was highlighted. A few responses touched on the need for CEC members to have more engagement with the wider student body, including opportunities for meeting students face-to-face.

“The CEC members in my view need to be much more visible, perhaps a dedicated CEC blog would be useful to update active students (and the wider student body) of our activities. The [OU Students Magazine] could perhaps be more frequent with more information relating to student association projects and OU policy changes…”

“It might be useful if details of when/where large tutorials/day schools are taking place so that OUSA reps can attend to hand out flyers, maybe have a 5 minute presentation and generally be around during the day if students want to find out more about the association.”

"I think we really need to invest heavily in a media campaign. I suggested to the Conference steering group committee that we should have a professional film maker on site to record the Conference. This would give us lots of material to help create awareness throughout the year…There are lots of opportunities to develop this throughout the year, for example at student workshops, consultations and our presence at Graduations.”

7.2 Discussion points

? In what ways can the wider student body be kept better informed of developments that are pertinent to their study experience?

? In what ways can we enhance the Association’s visibility for the wider student body?

8 Improving the CEC meetings

8.1 The majority of responses indicate satisfaction with the notification of the CEC meetings, timely information about the scheduled sessions and hotel arrangements. However, it was felt that more time could be devoted to discussing policy matters in more detail.

“I think we are a couple of business hours short at the CEC. We still don’t really debate policy – there are better discussions at SRG. But it’s our job to form those policies!”
“More training, more policy, probably more bonding, definitely more time”

“I think we are still reluctant to be open about disagreements, reluctant to invoke local member dissatisfaction and reluctant to tell the punters about our failures.”

“We should be more prepared to interrogate ideas as a group.”

8.2 Respondents also welcomed the opportunity to meet student representatives from other student unions.

“I think it is very important to engage with the wider higher education sector and to learn from other SU activists and representatives, we have much more in common with students in brick universities and can learn much from each other. It is also important that where possible we help other Sus to understand the nature of OU study and break down some of the misconceptions people may have about our university. I think we could have a much stronger voice if we worked more closely with other student representatives.”

8.3 Discussion point

? Do you have further suggestions for including activities that could help members gain more from their investment of time?

9 Strengthening working relationships between CEC members and Association staff

9.1 A majority of the respondents (five of the eight responses received) gave additional feedback on developing the working relationships with Association staff members. Two responses suggested ideas such as ‘a video or spoken piece’ for staff members to introduce themselves and talk about their roles.

“Most staff aren’t at our discussions. None of those staff are psychic.”

“There should be an opportunity for CEC members to meet all of the staff team informally at the start of the term. This needs to be a getting to know each other style of event which really encourages interaction between staff and students. The OUSA website (new and improved) could include profiles of staff and what their role entails. It would be good to have 1 named staff contact who can help to support us in our roles. This would be particularly helpful to new students on the CEC.”

“For officers a dedicated face to face session with their counterpart in the office as part of the induction is essential. If meetings could be arranged with the more junior office staff - maybe when the elected officer is up to MK for another meeting - that would be so much the better. As for the rest I suspect a lot will be down to interpersonal relationships and how they are handled.”

“All the staff have I dealt with have gone out of their way to be helpful but I don’t have a good understanding of the roles of staff members. I’m sure the knowledge varies throughout the CEC about what the roles entail. Maybe
some reports from the different teams about their activities could be included in the CEC papers.”

9.2 Discussion point

What activities would you suggest to strengthen your working relationship with the Association’s staff members?

10. Conclusion

The feedback so far has been very constructive in identifying areas where the CEC could function more effectively, and further discussion on this topic would be most welcome. Further feedback will be used to develop plans for improved support for CEC members.

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