University Students Consultative Forum

Consultation on payment of OU Students Association President and Deputy President
18–30 May 2016

Summary
Record of contributions

The complete record of the discussion can be viewed on the forum. There were 154 posts by students plus 2 emails sent direct to the Student Consultation Office. 22 students made at least 1 post. There were 60 ratings. Some of the most ‘liked’ posts:

No-one is likely to stand for either role for mercenary reasons. The paid roles are time limited. And we all have a vote in our choice of the most appropriate candidate.

I am strongly against any requirement that post holders should have to be based in Milton Keynes. Making frequent or extended trips is one thing, relocating away from family and friends is another.

I think the requirement to have filled a voluntary OUSA role, or maybe be able to show other evidence of connecting with OUSA over a period of time, would be a good idea.
Q1: What views do you have about the Association exploring a part-time and paid model for the President and Deputy President of the Association? Do you think it matters to students whether the President and Deputy President representing them are paid or unpaid? If so, in what ways does it matter?

The majority of students posting in this thread supported exploring a part-time and paid model for the President and Deputy President of the Association. There was strong opposition to any requirement for office holders to move to Milton Keynes.

Points made about the principle included:

• There was some concern that payment may attract candidates with financial or career motivations. However, others felt that the level of payment, alongside the level of work expected, would be unlikely to attract those only interested in the money.
• Paying these two officers part-time may set an unwanted precedent for further volunteer roles to be ‘professionalised’ or for part-time positions to become full-time, which could make them less in touch with the student body and be more exclusive.
• The roles are requiring increasing time and workload and it is unrealistic to expect students to continue to do this unpaid. Payment should enable a greater commitment to be made to the role.
• Other volunteers may resent that only these two roles are paid, however it was noted legislation prohibited student officers being paid for more than two years so leaving these roles unpaid meant that people could progress from an unpaid officer role to President or Deputy President.
• Alongside payment, office holders should expect greater accountability of what they are paid to do, including contracts.
• The OU is out of step with the rest of the higher education sector on this issue (possibly rightly because of demographics).
• The ‘ethos’ of the positions could change if changed from voluntary to paid, and there may not be the same level of commitment and the distinctiveness of the role(s) would be lost.
• Increased demands from the University about what could be expected of paid officers would need to be guarded against.
• Out of pocket expenses should be reimbursed (as they are, although often late from the University), plus maybe other recompense.
• A part-time paid model may exclude fewer potential candidates than the current unpaid model but it would still exclude many.

Points made about whether it matters to students included:

• Students just want their elected representatives to do a good job, the question of payment shouldn’t come into it.
• If these two officers are paid, students will regard them as more ‘professional’. This would mean they make more demands on them, which could be unrealistic, but also that they feel their interests are better represented.
• Students want their officers to be obviously students themselves and in touch with the student experience and this would be more possible with a part-time model than a full-time model.

There was some discussion about whether a level of Students Association involvement should be a pre-requisite for the roles.
Q2: What advantages and what disadvantages could you see for the Students Association in having a paid President and Deputy President?

What advantages and what disadvantages could you see for the Association in maintaining the current situation of having a President and Deputy President that are unpaid volunteers?

Some of the points raised here were similar to those mentioned under question 1.

**Advantages of payment:**
- Posts are more attractive and enable a larger number of students (possibly of a higher standard) to put themselves forward.
- Post-holders are recompensed to some degree for the work they are doing.
- It should enable post-holders to give more time and energy to the job (although an acknowledgement that lots of time and energy is already given but currently unpaid) and reduce the feelings of stress and being 'out of pocket'.
- Strengthening the student voice and giving students greater confidence that their voice is being heard.
- Post-holders may feel more accountable for the work they are undertaking (this has a downside if they put themselves under too much pressure).
- Advantages of part-time are that there would be fewer changes to life and work commitments required than full-time, roles retain the volunteering element and it acts as a brake on role expansion.

**Disadvantages of payment:**
- Students motivated by the financial incentive or for career-related reasons.
- Students receiving benefits may be put off applying because of implications for their other income.
- May make office holders more remote from the student body and less independent of the OU (particularly if full time).
- The role becomes more of a ‘job’, rather than being a representative of students, losing the volunteer ethos.
- Attracting more candidates makes it more difficult for students to engage with elections and make an informed choice.
- There would be a greater need for mechanisms to hold the post-holders to account and a greater need for consequences if the role-holder were not able to fulfil the job as specified.
- It would still be difficult for many students to put themselves forward given other personal, financial or employment commitments, and may make it more difficult for some who do not have the flexibility to take on part-time paid employment.
- Making the roles full-time and/or Milton Keynes-based would narrow the field of potential candidates significantly.
- Danger of ‘mission creep’ – expectations from other students and the University greater than a part-time post warrants.
- Creating a two-tier officer team with potential acrimony and resentment between the paid and the unpaid.

A suggestion was discussed that payment should be based on loss of earnings to make the roles more feasible for mid-career students, although there was a debate around whether this could be accurately judged and the possible need for a cap.
Q3: What impact do you think it will have for the success of the Association’s future elections if the positions are paid or unpaid?
For example, would students be more likely to stand or vote in the elections if the positions were paid or unpaid?

Some of the points raised here were similar to those mentioned under questions 1 and 2. Some students thought there would be more candidates and more students voting if the positions were paid. Others were unsure whether the changes would impact on elections. Additional points made:

- Role holders may be more likely to serve a full term if they were paid.
- Paying the role holders may mean fewer candidates as some students would be unable to adapt their other employment accordingly.
- There were some downsides to having more candidates as it may make it more difficult for students to engage with the elections – too much information.

There was further discussion about whether a requirement of previous Students Association activity should be introduced for the paid positions with some students feeling it should be and others wanting it to be left up to the electorate to decide the most suitable candidate for the job. There should be a stipulation that candidates were students.

There was a question about the implications of electing students on a manifesto of ‘creative writing’. It was also suggested that there may be room for restrictions in terms of OU experience – would students be eligible if they had only signed up for one module? – and a question about restrictions at other Higher Education Institutions.

A suggestion was made that University and Students Association expense rates should be the same and that a loss-of-earnings model of expenses (as was in place previously) be explored.

One student emailed in an alternative model with a full-time president who should have completed their study in the past 18 months, having already completed a term as an OU Students Association officer, with the Deputy President unpaid.

It is likely to increase candidature amongst those with no commitments and not in an established career. It may actually reduce it amongst those who can't take a career break. Offering compensation for loss of earnings might avoid this bias.

I am opposed to any restrictions on the rights of our fellow students to elect whoever they choose - let alone allowing current students to bind their future counterparts.

I don't think it will increase/decrease the number of students voting. What matters to them (I hope) is whether they believe that candidates will do a good job.
Q4: Having considered the matter, do you think the Students Association’s President and Deputy President should be paid or unpaid? (please briefly explain)

Nine students responding were clearly in favour of paying the President and Deputy President, there was only one student who preferred the current model. Three students would prefer a different type of model where students are offered a higher level of financial compensation for the time spent in the roles than currently and three students would need further information and discussion before offering a firm opinion. The points raised were in the main those already expressed elsewhere in the consultation, with the additional point that paying the officers would increase their profile in the OU and beyond.

I think they should be paid but that the role should have time and financial parameters that would ensure it didn’t seep into becoming a full-time job.

What pay are we talking about in return for which responsibilities and time/location commitments?
What happens if someone can no longer/is no longer fulfilling the role, and who decides that's the case?

These roles are very time consuming and involved. It is reasonable to pay appropriately.

Next steps

• The Students Association’s Board of Trustees will make the final decision on whether to implement payment.
• There will be a debate and vote on the principle at the forthcoming OU Students Association Conference, 17-19 June 2016 when student delegates will get to have their say.
• Following Conference, the outcome of all of the practical advice we have sought, the findings of this student consultation and the outcome of the debate and vote at Conference will be considered in full by the Board of Trustees and they will make a final decision. This is likely to be made during July 2016 and will be made known to students via the Association’s website and other communication channels as soon as possible.