

‘Be prepared for the biggest roller coaster of your life’: investigating the experience of being a sabbatical officer in UK HE

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Research Domains

Management, leadership, governance and quality (MLGQ)

Abstract

Sabbatical officers are traditionally perceived as agents of political change who represent student unions to their university. Recent rhetoric centres on discussions of partnership working and collaboration between student unions and universities. In this paper we will draw on data collected from two national, UK-based surveys, and follow up interviews, with sabbatical officers and student union staff, to examine the sabbatical officers' role. Using Activity Theory, we will discuss how sabbatical officers learn about, and enact, their roles, considering individuals who influence their work and the tools / artefacts drawn on in practice. Provisional analysis indicates the demanding nature of their role, with permanent student union staff, and senior university leaders, guiding sabbatical officers work. This suggests that change achieved by sabbatical officers is realised by serving as representatives of student voice through university governance structures, rather than by forms of protest and activism.

Full paper

Sabbatical officers are current or recently graduated students elected by members of a students' unions to represent their interests to their university. They play an important role in shaping local practice, and through an affiliation many student unions hold with the National Union of Students, have been a powerful agent for change nationally (Brooks et al., 2015). However, successive governments have used legislation to redefine the work of sabbatical officers, shifting their focus away from activism and protest, towards representation (Day & Dickerson 2018). Just as universities have become accountable to their student body, so too have student unions. The inclusion of student unions in the National Student Survey, allows students to share their views on the representation activities undertaken by students' unions (Afterline, 2017). Guan et al. (2016) indicated this has redefined the work of student unions to concentrating on issues that are of immediate concern to their local student body. In parallel, the relationship between universities and student unions has changed, with growing emphasis on partnership and collaboration (Brooks et al., 2016).

Given these changes, it is perhaps unsurprising that to ensure continuity in student union working practices, permanent, non-elected staff have become an established feature of student unions (Brooks et al. 2015). Though these are recognised as providing an important source of

support, the work undertaken by this growing body of non-elected staff, has received limited attention from the research community. In this paper we use Activity Theory (Engström, 1987) to address the following questions:

- What is the remit of the contemporary sabbatical officer role?
- What are the artefacts, support networks and relationships sabbatical officers draw on during their time in office?
- How do non-elected student union staff shape the work undertaken by Sabbatical Officers?

Methods

Two national surveys were undertaken to capture contemporary data regarding the work of sabbatical officers, one targeted sabbatical officers, the second completed by non-elected student union staff. Respectively, a 59% (n=78) response rate was achieved for the sabbatical officer survey and a 54% (n=77) response rate for the non-elected staff survey. Following this, four sabbatical officers and six staff members were purposefully selected to participate in interviews. They were selected from the sample who volunteered and were based at the same students' union. The interviews provided opportunity to build on themes explored in the surveys.

Results

Sabbatical officers reported dedicating their majority of their time to advocacy (91%). Working with student representatives (68%), attending institutional level meetings (66%) and liaising with senior leaders (60%) were highlighted as 'amongst their top 5 priorities'^[1]. When asked to select 'activities important to their role'^[2] 'building and maintaining relationships' was selected by 99% of respondents, 'working with professionalism' by 96% and 'demonstrating leadership' by 94%. Interestingly, 'challenging authority,' an activity that may have been traditionally associated with the work of sabbatical officers, was selected by only 82% of respondents.

During their interviews non-elected staff described the sabbatical officer's role as carrying "*kudos and capacity to influence*" attributing this to sabbatical officers' access to high level committees and senior leaders. This was perceived as providing a "*route into university decision making.*" Consequently, non-elected staff reported dedicating considerable time to preparing sabbatical officers to working through these mechanisms, guiding them on how to "*read documents*" and "*learn institutional processes.*"

In their interviews sabbatical officers deemed this preparation essential; they described it as providing a "*safety net,*" helping them negotiate a "*steep learning curve*" following election. Non-elected staff provided high levels of support throughout their term in office. They reported

needing to help sabbatical officers manage the “*push and pull*” of their role, commonly experienced when mismatches in the priorities of the university and sabbatical officer occurred. Often, due to reasons beyond the control of the sabbatical officer (e.g., institutional restructuring, differing priorities) their ambitions for their time in office needed to be adjusted. This could be a challenging or frustrating process for sabbatical officers, one which the non-elected staff were key in managing, to avoid disengagement, and to ensure the interests of the student union continued to be represented.

Provisional conclusions

These data highlight the demanding nature of the sabbatical officer role. They are accountable to ‘multiple masters’ and their work is vulnerable to being redefined by factors beyond their control. Though well supported, these data prompt us to question the extent to which the work undertaken by sabbatical officers can achieve lasting change.

^[1] N=71, multiple response options possible

^[2] N=71, multiple response options possible

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