Speakers: Andrew Cooke, Peter Bell and Melanie Philpott

AC Hi. So we are three of the Open University Student Association Student Trustees and we’re here on the Open University campus. We’ve just come out of a Trustee meeting and we’re going to talk a little bit about what it means to be a Trustee, what is a Trustee, and what we’ve got out of the experience. So we’ll do introductions first. I’m Andrew Cooke, a Student Trustee.

PB I’m Peter Bell, I’m another Student Trustee.

MP And I’m Melanie Philpott, another Student Trustee.

AC There we go, introductions. Beyond that, I think the most important thing is let’s define what a Trustee is. Anyone want a feel of that one?

MP Peter’s got a good answer for this one!

PB So, the Trustees. Most of the Trustees are elected by the student body. We’ve got a couple of external Trustees who are appointed, and between us, the Trustees are the people that are responsible overall for the Association. We’re legally responsible for the Association, so our focus is very much on the financial side and making sure we live within our means. The Association employs quite a number of staff, and so we’re responsible as the employers of those staff. And we’re responsible for making sure whatever the Association does and complies with the rules and regulations, they stay legal. And we’re involved in helping to set strategy and approving the strategy that the Association has developed. But we work closely within another group of students, who are the CEC, the Central Executive Committee, who are responsible for setting the policy of the Association, and our job really is to just review and make sure that we’re legal.

AC That’s it.

MP And we do a lot of biscuits as well in our meetings. That’s a very important responsibility, as far as I’m concerned!

AC She loves the biscuits!

MP Yes, I do!

AC So, if I were to ask you what skills you’ve learned and developed, if you had to pick your top one?
MP Well, I’ve really enhanced my biscuit eating, I think.

AC Excellent!

MP Let me explain. In the Trustee meetings we get a massive plate of biscuits, and obviously that shouldn’t be a selling point for taking part.

AC Bribery!

MP But it does help. But I’ve learnt quite a lot of professional skills, so I’ve certainly learnt how a meeting should be chaired professionally, and there’s a lot of reading, so I’ve learnt to speed-read very well.

AC Yeah, and I’d go for the speed reading. There is a lot of reading to do, a lot of information to take in, and finding a way that you’re actually going to retain it can be quite a challenge. That’s something that I’ve had to adapt, the way that I would go through papers, things in advance, to actually keep the information present so that I can use it. I’ve also learnt a lot around possibly like changing the way I would put my point across.

PB Mm-hm.

AC It’s all well and good, once I’d committed in my mind that this is the right way to go, whatever it be, but it doesn’t mean everyone else agrees. So you either have to be strong enough to stand there and say, ‘Look, even if you all disagree, I’ve got courage of conviction and I believe this is the right way to go,’ and try and win people round. You may just have to accept that no matter how strongly you believe that what you want to do, what you think should be done is the right thing, but it’s not going to happen and you have to professionally accept that and move on and move with the group. So it’s quite an interesting, very character-building experience, I would say.

MP Yeah, and I’d say on the back of that, you always have to have in the back of your mind what’s the best thing for the Association and the Association’s future. And what you might be thinking is the best way, actually may not be in line with that, so you have to be able to listen to other people’s views and really consider every single perspective and take it on all on board.

AC Yeah, it’s when you build that collaborative team, and I think we’re certainly at that point now, as this current Board. We can collaborate, we can understand that I may think one thing, you think another, you think a third, but actually, if you find some kind of middle ground between the three ideas, you actually have a workable, practicable route forward.
MP  What have you learnt then, Peter?

PB  Well, I think it’s that constructive challenge, isn’t it, and learning to do that, and not in a negative way, but in a positive way, so to welcome challenge. So that your views actually sometimes help you develop your convictions, is to have to explain to somebody else, who doesn’t always see things the same way, why you think what you think, and sometimes that will change your view. And that’s been quite good to learn how to do that.

AC  Yeah.

PB  I suppose the other thing is getting used to, as well, because quite a bit of work happens on the forums, in between meetings, and to learn to engage with that and make sure, as well, that you’re able to communicate in that way. Because I found that difficult to start with, but actually it’s a skill you can learn. So now, if I go onto an online forum, I’m quite happy to think carefully about what I write, because, first of all, you’re committing it to writing and lots of people will see it. So think more carefully about how you express yourself, how you’re respectful of others, because sometimes you can write things, which you think are fine, but when you actually turn around and look and think: if I was receiving that, how would it sound? And is it actually getting my point across in the way I want it to be?

So, that’s been a really good skill to learn, and to be challenged on when you don’t get it right, because you don’t always get things right. But I suppose the nice thing for me, as well, is the support we had, the induction handover weekend, the training, and then ongoing support from the staff, particularly the team that support at the Board meetings has been really excellent in helping you to get through that and actually to always keep focused on what we should be doing, so that’s been really a very positive thing.

MP  And we’ve also got to take part in something like this. Now, this morning, I didn’t know we were going to do this today.

AC  No, we found this out like three hours ago.

MP  Yeah, yeah, we thought we’d got away with not having to do it, but then we realised we didn’t get away with it at all, and here we are, completely unprepared!

AC  Well, that’s how you go to a Trustee meeting a lot of the times. Yeah, you get papers ahead of time, but you don’t know what the views of the other Trustees are going to be, necessarily. Sometimes you get papers at very short notice.
Sometimes something happened last night, and you still need to just kind of go in and tackle whatever that is.

MP You’ve got to be flexible, haven’t you?

AC You have to be massively agile – massively.

PB I think the other thing is that the different Trustees contribute in different ways, according to the a) the skills they’ve got, and also the time they’ve got available, so it can take up quite a lot of time, if you undertake to do lots of things. And so it’s not strictly just coming up here four times a year to have a meeting.

MP That’s a really good point, Peter.

PB There’s a lot more around it, and, in fact, you can get involved quite deeply in things. But also we have to remember that our responsibility is in a particular area, for a particular, you know. So we’re trying to make sure things are legal, the finances are looked after, the risks are monitored, which is one particular aspect. And there’s another group, which is the CEC, it stands for Central Executive Committee.

AC Central Exec Committee.

PB And which is really the main body driving policy within the Students Association, and working with the CEC, to enable them to be able to do their role, so that they can get on and do their work, which is the important policy setting work and driving what the Association does, and us to sit down and be enablers of that. And occasionally, maybe, just to say, ‘Well, hang on a second. That has got a legal, that has got a financial or a risk implication.’ And I think, as well, that’s developed, where we now have observers from CEC, who are more than observers now, aren’t they? They participate in the meeting.

AC They participate.

MP We should explain what that is. So an observer is someone who’s come from the CEC, who’s come to one of our meetings, just to see what happens, get involved, ask questions, get really involved in the conversation.

AC And see what happens in a Trustee meeting.
MP And the Trustees are also allowed to go and observe the CEC meetings as well, so there’s a real cross-collaboration and it makes a real difference, I think.

AC Which is very valuable. I went and viewed and took part in a CEC meeting this time last year and it was an incredibly valuable thing to go and do, to see exactly what challenges they were facing, what they were trying to push through, what they wanted to happen, and to see the excitement and the enthusiasm that goes into what they’re putting together. And then it gives you a new sense of what you’re doing as a Trustee, when you see that proposal come into a Trustee meeting and HEFCE, and, actually, you know what? If there’s a little bit missing, it’s harder, then, at that point, almost, to kind of say, ‘Actually, you know what? As brilliant as it is, that needs to go back and just be edited slightly, because there’s a legal implication or a financial,’ or whatever it be. And you have to learn. We’ve had to learn, I think, all of us probably, when to say no and how to say no.

PB Yeah.

AC Because you get met with these brilliant ideas, that you would love to say yes to all of them, but we don’t have the infinity billion pounds to do them all, so you have to say, ‘No, the finance can only go so far,’ and you pick what you hope is going to be the best thing and what shows the most potential.

MP For the Association.

AC For the Association going forward.

MP And also, there are lots of biscuits at CEC weekends.

AC It’s not all spent on biscuits, I swear to God.

MP No, it’s not!

AC If it were to ask you – I’m going to put you both really on the spot – how many times over the last two years you think you’ve down to campus?

MP Oh, I don’t know.

AC And how long, on average, would you say the meetings have been?

MP As a Trustee?
AC  As a Trustee, yeah. I know you did, like, 16 other things, but put them to the side!

MP  Over the last two years?

AC  Yeah.

MP  Oh, I don’t know. We have, what, four meetings?

AC  Well, if it’s four scheduled, but how many have we actually had? Because the one that we’ve been on today was scheduled at the last meeting, so this is extra, so this is at least number five for this year.

PB  I’ve probably been 12 or 14 times.

MP  Yeah, I suppose the interviews.

PB  Including a couple of weekends. But then, of course...

MP  But it’s not all on site, is it? It’s if we do selection for recruitment panels. I’ve done that on Skype.

AC  I mean, each meeting is scheduled to be four to five hours and we quite often hit six hours.

MP  They are quite long, our meetings, with biscuits.

AC  They can be, yeah. Seriously, with the biscuits! So yeah, these meetings can be quite long. And you know what? They take a lot of concentration and a lot of thought, and you’ve done all that pre-reading. I mean, for myself, I drive down from Manchester for each one. We’ve got commuting distances, and as we know, we’re distant learning.

PB  I come up by train from London. But I mean the other thing...

AC  And you’re commuting.

MP  Yeah, I come in from the south west.

PB  And if you’re travelling from a long distance away, you can stay overnight, the night before.

MP  Yeah, that’s important to mention.
PB  And be able to stay here. And of course the normal Trustee meetings at the moment are held during working hours, during the days, work days, but of course things like the CEC weekends, it’s a whole weekend, here on campus or at the conference centre just next to campus, and you’re encouraged to be able to participate. So it really is a good support.

MP  Yeah, and actually, next year’s Board of Trustees may decide to have their meetings in a different way, or they might choose to have them at weekends or something. I mean, I took part in the Remuneration Committee and I did telephone. Well, I was on the telephone while some of them met, so you don’t always have to be here for that.

AC  Yeah, it’s a wonderful world of 21st century technology and we can make a lot of things happen. The important thing is for the next Board for a season, and CEC, likely, will make a lot of these decisions about how the meetings are going to look for themselves. It might be that...

MP  Yeah, it’s got to work for them.

AC  This is it. It’s a voluntary role, at the end of the day. You’ve got studying to balance with it; you might have employment, full-time or part-time, to balance with that.

MP  It’s balancing. And family commitments.

AC  I mean you’re already taking a lot of family commitments. It’s rewarding, but it’s a challenge. Which brings us on to, the election’s coming up. What are they? Anyone want to field that or am I going to go? Okay, I think I’m fielding that one! The election’s coming up, so every two years the CEC and the Board of Trustees will be re-elected from within the student population, by the student population, and this is my ‘make sure you go to the polling station,’ except the polling station comes to you because it’s all online. So there’s really no excuse. You need to vote. You do need to vote, and I’m not just saying that because it’s that kind of...

MP  Well, first you need to stand, nominate yourself.

AC  Well, yeah, true, yeah. Actually, yeah, the first thing you need to do is decide whether you’re interested in standing as a Trustee or a member of the CEC and put together your nomination pitch. Go through your questions from the student body, and, hopefully, build yourself a really strong case as to why we should vote for you next time. But then you do need to vote, you need to get involved and vote.
MP  So if I wanted to know how to get more information about this, what would I do?

AC  There are two things you could do. There’s probably more than to be two things, to be honest, that was a bit dramatic!

MP  Talk to us.

AC  Yeah, talk to people if you see them around, pull us to one side, that’s one great way. The best way to start is go to the website www.oustudents.com/elections-2018. The second option, for those of you that didn’t catch that, didn’t write it down, or because I spoke too fast it was impossible to hear, google it, because it will just show up on Google.

MP  Or go to OUstudents.com and there will be a link on there, or Facebook, of course.

AC  Or that.

MP  Yeah, or Twitter.

AC  Or that.

MP  Yeah.

PB  And you can always call the Association and speak to somebody and ask to... And I’ll be quite happy to talk to anybody that wants to, either online, or associates will give me contact details, so we’ll chat on the phone to explain what I’ve found within the role and answer questions. And I’m sure you guys would be happy to take things online.

AC  Yeah.

MP  Yeah.

PB  So either look at the website or contact the Association and ask for some further information.

MP  Okie-doke.

AC  That’s it. There we go.

MP  Are we done?
AC  I think that’s it.

MP  We think we’ve covered everything now. Take part and vote.

AC  Vote.

PB  And let’s go and have some biscuits.

MP  Oh, biscuits! Right.