

# A Black Students Officer in every Union Briefing



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### Introduction

NUS Black Students' Campaign is the largest body of Black students in Europe. It was set up 15 years ago to represent students of African, Arab, Asian, and Caribbean descent at a local and national level. While Black students constitute 20 per cent of the NUS' membership, they are among the least represented groups within the union's democratic and social structures. However, these numbers are not reflected amongst elected union sabbatical and executive officers; recent years have seen the creation of a Wales and Scottish Black Students Officer and campaign, and an increase in the number of Black National executive members.

The link between this under-representation and the disadvantage Black students face in education and beyond cannot be under-estimated. The reality is that endemic prejudice and inequality result in Black students facing discrimination at every stage of education: from college and university admissions through to their final exams. Racism means that Black students are given lower marks compared to white students when anonymous marking is not in place; Black students have disproportionately higher levels of drop-out and exclusion, higher rates of mental health problems, larger student debt, a greater propensity to be unemployed after graduation despite higher final marks, and within five years are likely to be earning less than their white peers for the same job.

This reality is the clearest manifestation of the social, economic and cultural racism that Black communities face. The need for Black representation has never been starker, and yet, the arguments for increased representation are not won throughout the movement.

Without proper representation from the Black community these issues, and others, are unlikely to be achieved by our unions. The likelihood is that unless students' unions redress the issue of underrepresentation Black students will continue to miss out on academic and welfare support, remain on the fringe of union activities and fail to realise the full benefits of being in a union, or their own potential.

This is why the NUS Black Students' Campaign is facilitating the increased 0engagement and participation of Black students with their unions' structures, locally and nationally.

Failure is not an option. It is vital that every institution improves its representation of Black students to build a more open and inclusive union that eliminates the damaging consequences of exclusion. Under the Race Relations (Amendment) Act (2000), to which students' unions are bound, there is a requirement that unions promote good race relations. The initiative for a Black Students' Officer in every Union is a good way to achieve compliance on this point of law.

# Black Autonomy and Self-Organisation

Like the other NUS liberation groups, the NUS Black Students' Campaign is a self-organised body. This follows the principle that the victims of racism are best placed to set the agenda to challenge it. This means that Black students set their own agenda, elect their national officer and committee, and determine policy at their summer conference. This policy shapes the Campaign's local and national work to ensure the Black perspective is fully integrated into the fabric of students' unions and society.

It is through a partnership of community groups, Black trade unionists and student members that the NUS Black Students' Campaign supports initiatives to ensure Black representation and equality in NUS and throughout the educational experience.

## Case Studies of Black Representation in Action

There are many good examples of Black representation being implemented on campus.

Below are some examples for you to consider:

#### Sheffield University

In 2000, Sheffield University Students' Union set-up a Black Students' Committee after an internal audit found that few Black students actively participated in the union's activities or campaigns. The Committee developed an autonomous forum where Black students could meet to determine what their needs and interests were at the University and how these could be met.

The presence of a Black Students' Committee led the way to increased consultation and participation of Black students. The result was that policies were brought to the student council which strengthened support for Black students e.g. how to handle complaints about discrimination, creating positive ways to attract Black students' involvement, and how to include more Black students in union elections. Over the years, this committee has been constituted as part of the union's formal structures which makes decisions in the union executive.

#### Cambridge University

At Cambridge University in 2001, an informal group of Black students produced a Black students' handbook as part of an awareness raising campaign to explain their needs. It provided valuable social, cultural and welfare information, as well as addressing the experiences of Black students at the University. The handbook looked at what it means to be part of a multicultural society, and how this principle could be strengthened. The handbook helped involve many Black students through consultation and focus groups, and generated debate about what a Black students' officer would do. The initiative got local and national media coverage, which also helped increase the number of Black students applying to the University. A successful national version of the handbook has been produced by the NUS Black Students Campaign.

#### Goldsmith's College

Black students at Goldsmith's implemented Black representation by making the post of Black Students' Officer a full member of the union's decision-making executive. This ensured permanent, accountable, representation of Black students' interests in the union, and allowed them to organise events for Black students including a debate on the Stephen Lawrence Inquiry, and film showings about the BNP for the Mayor of London's 'Rise Against Racism' week, in partnership with the Student Assembly Against Racism (SAAR).

To achieve this, Black students worked together to write a motion calling for representation and presented it to the union council. They lobbied council members to vote for the motion. They organised a large attendance of Black students at the meeting from the Black cultural and faith groups, demonstrating to the union that support existed and they were serious about winning representation.

# Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge University and Hills Road 6th Form College

Black students at ARU, Cambridge and Hills Road 6th Form led an anti-racism campaign that demonstrated the strength of Black self-organisation. Nick Griffin, leader of the racist BNP, which calls for an 'all-white Britain', and Jean-Marie Le Pen, leader of France's National Front which wants Black people 'forcibly repatriated' out of the country, were both prevented from speaking at the Cambridge debating chamber because of an anti-racist protest. This event demonstrated successful Black student leadership of the anti-racism struggle, uniting all students against the threat posed by the Far-Right.

#### Preston College & Cardinal Newman College

Members of Black student groups at Preston College and Cardinal Newman College ran a voter registration campaign for the local elections after the council committed itself to closing a popular youth centre. The students mobilised the Black vote in the election and worked with local community groups to pressurize the council out of closing the youth centre. Inspired by this success, the students at the colleges have since lobbied for formal Black representation on their student councils.



# Winning the Arguments for a Black Students' Officer

Some people continue to question the need for a Black Students' Officer or committee, and the NUS Black Students' Campaign. Whatever the reason, it is useful to be familiar with their arguments. It may be that you have been through them hundreds of times before. On the other hand, the need for these things can sometimes seem so obvious that you don't know where to start refuting them.

Over the next few pages, you will find a list of the most common questions students' unions face about Black representation. We provide some standard responses. Bear in mind that every union's circumstances are different and there is no ideal option that suits every representative body.

If you need any support please do not hesitate to contact Bellavia Ribeiro-Addy, NUS Black Students Officer e:bell@nus.org.uk m: 07950614989

# Why do we need a Black Students' Campaign? Surely Black people are equal now?

The Black civil rights movement in Britain has come a long way since the early 1970s and the political dawn for improved rights. This shows that collective Black self-organised action really does get results.

After much campaigning, Black people now have the right to equal pay, and protection for their religious and cultural practices, they can take action over racial discrimination at work and many other rights that were previously denied. However, despite anti-discrimination laws, Black people still face disadvantage because of their ethnicity.

The view of the NUS Black Students' Campaign, that racial inequality persists today, is backed up by statistics like:

 Black students are up to 8 times more likely to experience mental health problems than their white peers, yet are two times less likely to access resources to help them through the illness.
 Mind Report,

- Within six months of graduating Black students are three times more likely to be unemployed.
   Within five years of leaving college Black students can expect to be earning nine per cent less than their white counterparts for the same standard of work.
- Asians are 18 times more likely and African-Caribbeans 27 times more likely, to be stopped and searched by police than white people.
   Home Office Report on Stop and Search Policing
- 75 per cent of Britain's Black communities live in 88 of the poorest boroughs across Britain.
   Census Data Analysis
- Job applicants with an African name are 25 per cent likely to get an interview, while those with a Muslim name are only 18 per cent likely to get an interview than white peers, or those with a British sounding name.

The Guardian newspaper investigation,

#### Why isn't there a White Students' Campaign?

Black people make up 60 per cent of humankind and 9 per cent of British society. So why do Black people need specific representation and white people don't? The NUS Black Students' Campaign believes that specific representation for Black students [the language of 'special' representation is best avoided] is essential as Black people face systematic discrimination and disadvantage within education, employment and throughout society specifically because of racism.

Black people continue to be under-represented in every democratic and institutional Power structure, including Parliament. The Campaign is here to challenge this imbalance and fight the inherent discrimination that Black students face as Black people. Student unions, as with all institutions and decision-making bodies, do not systematically discriminate against white people so there is not a problem of under-representation of white people. However, white people may get discriminated against because of other factors e.g. they are a woman, disabled or gay. It is worth asking the question, 'what would a white students' campaign actually do?' There



are few issues that primarily, or solely, concern white people. Coeliac disease is occasionally highlighted, but this is an example of a welfare issue and not a 'liberation issue' and should be addressed by the union's welfare officer.

Liberation campaigns seek to represent and empower communities who experience discrimination and disadvantage in terms of status and opportunity because they belong to, or are perceived to belong to, a particular social group. White people are not disadvantaged due to a dominant and embedded culture that discriminates against their ethnicity and has a long history of doing so – Black people are.

#### What has all this got to do with students?

A lot! Black students are part of a society that systematically discriminates against Black people. Among Black students there are those who experience disproportionate levels of mental health problems, inequality in exam scores, suffer racist abuse and assault to give but a few examples.

Unfortunately, Black people experience racial discrimination that relates specifically to their student lives and their lives as graduates of FE and HE institutions. Following a campaign initiated by the NUS Black Students' Campaign to implement anonymous marking at Leeds University, statistics show that the marks of women and Black students increased by 12 per cent.

The NUS Black Students' Campaign also operates on the principle of solidarity. That is to say, an injury to one is regarded as an injury to all. For example, the NUS Black Students' Campaign hopes that even those Black students who don't feel personally and directly affected by racial abuse will act on their concern that it is happening to other Black students.

# Why are some NUS Black Students' Campaign events for Black students only?

The NUS Black Students' Campaign is about Black students organising themselves as Black students and making decisions about their lives. This is not to say that white students can not be involved in campaigning on issues of concern to Black students,

but they must allow Black students to define their own priorities. The Campaign holds open-events to which white students are invited, e.g. Liberation 2008/9, Black History Month events in October and NUS Anti-Racism Conference. This year will see even more opportunities. However, we want Black students to make their own decisions about the Campaign, so conferences, committee meetings and some key events are for Black students only.

# Surely an Equal Opportunities Officer could, represent Black students?

Many Equal Opportunities Officers do a good job managing a large portfolio. The creation of an Equal Opportunities Officer is a useful first step towards creating awareness around equality issues in a union, especially in smaller colleges where separate liberation officers are not always a feasible option. However, this is not ideal, as it is unrealistic for any one person to fully understand and represent the needs and interests of all minority groups: Black, lesbian, gay and bisexual, women and disabled students. Effective representation needs to include members of disadvantaged groups themselves, otherwise it is open to accusations of tokenism.

# Why shouldn't a white student take up the position of a Black Students' Officer?

Black peoples' liberation and equality is about Black people organising themselves, as Black people and making decisions about their lives. It would be impossible for a white student to represent Black students and no white student, however well informed and sympathetic, can speak with the full authority of experience about issues of concern to Black students. That is not to say that white students cannot be involved in campaigning on issues of concern to Black students, but they must ,allow Black students to define their own priorities.

# Autonomous Black student spaces discriminate against white students - they're racist and against equal opportunities!

A self-organised space is a positive action to redress the balance between white and Black students. Racism describes a systematic experience of discrimination or oppression, and must have power behind it to be discriminatory. Black students' groups in general, and the NUS Black Students' Campaign in particular, do not have that power to discriminate against white students and are not part of a systematic process discriminating against white people as a group. Ensuring equal opportunity does not mean treating everyone the same. If a particular group is disadvantaged, it may need particular representation to overcome this. Having a Black Students' Officer or group isn't about giving Black people more power than white people, it is about the most effective means of tackling the inequality faced by black students.

# Why is the campaign called 'Black Students' - surely it excludes people?

'Black' is a political definition, which unites all the communities affected by racism and underrepresentation. The term 'Black' represents African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean students. Awarenessraising should be done around this term and national Black organisations can be contacted to help with this. The most effective way to ensure Black underrepresentation is addressed is to ensure that this position is elected for, and by, Black students.



## Setting Up a Black Students' Group

This section looks at what Black students' groups are and how to set one up.

As Black Students' Officer you may have responsibility to run a Black students' group. This helps to ensure that the diverse views of Black students are represented and ensures that the Officer is accountable.

This may also be laid down clearly in a job description (see the model motion for a job description).

If no-one in your college is willing to get a group off the ground then the first steps are yours. Decide how to start it off and what involvement you will have. This role might evolve naturally, but it is helpful if you have a good idea of how you want the group to run. You may remain as the main organiser, or this might fall to someone within the group. Whatever happens, it is essential you remain involved. You are the link between Black students, the students' union and NUS.

#### What is a Black Students' Group?

The Black students' group is a chance for Black students' to get together. If possible, it is good to organise a mix of events in your Black students' group, as this will get more people interested. Some people might be interested in campaigning, while others may join to learn about Black students' issues and support.

At the start of the term many Black students' groups organise an informal meeting for those interested. It gives students the chance to see what the group is about. At the first meeting you could get students to fill in a questionnaire about what they want from the group. A model questionnaire is included in this pack and can be used to help you plan future events.

If you want advice about the first meeting then contact Bellavia Ribeiro-Addy, who will help you find speakers and plan the event. There are no hard and fast rules about what a Black students' group should do as the activities vary depending on what your Black students want. In the past groups have organised:

- Ensuring union events/activities are meeting the needs of black students by providing a forum for black students to voice their views
- Discussions on stop and search policing; the Iraq war; Make Poverty History and challenging racism in education
- Guest speakers talking on an issue. You could invite someone from NUS to speak at your meeting. Bell has a list of organisations who can help send speakers
- Campaign workshops on topics affecting Black students locally and nationally including awareness raising on racial and gender pay gaps
- Training sessions on running clubs and societies, self-esteem and applying for jobs
- Support for cultural events: a good way to showcase the cultural societies and how a Black Students' Officer can benefit them
- Marking internationally recognised days/events, such as: religious festivals (see the NUS Black Students' Handbook), Black History Month (all October) and Slavery Memorial Day (August 21st)

# Setting Up A Black Students' Group – Top Tips

# Decide the overall aims of the Black students' group

Write these down so that you are clear yourself and can show others. Know your own level of participation in the group. Check the Black Students' Officer job description – if you don't have one then write it (or use the one in this pack) and submit to your union committee or AGM.

# Find out the rules and regulations for clubs and societies in your union

There are usually rules governing what groups can and cannot spend their money on. It is good to be aware of these in advance rather than tripping up on them at a later stage.

#### Find a suitable venue

If you have a Union building there may be a room which you can use, otherwise book a college room for your meeting. Consider how accessible it is to all students: are there toilet facilities suitable for wheelchair users? Is there a prayer room nearby? Avoid religious holidays that will prohibit groups of black students attending.

#### Decide on a suitable timing

Finding a time that suits everyone is difficult but you can maximize be number of people who attend. Is there a time of week when most students are not in class e.g. Wednesday afternoon?

Remember, it may not suit students with children to have meetings in the evening. You could get members to suggest times that best suit them, or vary times of events to give more people the chance to join in. Why not survey your first meeting to find out what times suits most? You can use the questionnaire at the end of this pack.

# Make your Black students' group a safe space that includes everyone

Like all union events you should think about what steps you can take to ensure your Black students' group is accessible to all Black students and that everyone feels comfortable in the environment where you socialise and exchange ideas. At the first meeting the group can agree on ground rules and refer back to these at future meetings.

Are there particular groups who don't get involved like women, disabled, international, or lesbian, gay and bisexual Black students? What about groups like Chinese students? You could talk to your LGBT society, women's group or disabilities officer to find out ways in which you can make your events more accessible and work together on joint campaigns.

#### Promote your Black students' group

Get the message out to your students through:

- Word of mouth. Use success stories and casestudies of those who are involved, and get them to tell other students about it.
- Posters. Order NUS campaign posters or produce your own. Try posters in unusual places

   in toilets and stairwells, but beware – your college may prohibit posters except on notice boards. Be creative – use teaser campaigns, posters with unusual messages or very little writing.
- Set up a stall. This is a good, pro-active way
  of getting your message across students
  can question those on the stall and receive
  information specific to their situation. Remember
  that music, sweets and leaflets make it more
  attractive to students.
- Newsletters. If your union has a newspaper you could write an article about the group, or use it to advertise meetings.
- Student handbook. Put a page in the college prospectus, so that Black students know about the group before they start their course. Your students' union may produce its own handbook and could print an article in it. Many unions want to attract Black students and this group will help do that.
- E-mail. Can the IT department or registry let you send an e-mail to all students? You could also add details of the Black student group to your own emails.
  - Web site. If your union has a web site you should put details of your group on it web sites are easy to update and a good way of keeping members informed. If you don't have a web site, the college may put information on theirs. It's a good idea to include the web address on your materials.
- Noticeboards. Can you get a designated notice board for the Black students' group?
- Induction time. Do you go to the welcome for new students? This is a good opportunity to plug the Black students' group. Even if you don't get to speak, you can ask your President to mention it. Put up posters near where the induction happens.

#### Incentives

If you're holding an event, offer free food and drink. Note though, some Black students are put off events if they're based around alcohol for religious or cultural reasons. Be sure to offer nonalcoholic options, and find out if any of your group's members have special dietary needs and cater for it so everyone can join in.

#### Use the NUS Black Students' Campaign

Contact us for advice or just to run ideas past us. Tap into our national campaigns and use our resources to campaign locally and to make links with external organisations.

#### Evaluate

Examine your own aims and objectives: how could you improve the meeting? What was good and what didn't meet your expectations?

#### Look at feedback

See what participants have suggested and what they want from future meetings. This will help you ensure the group meets the expectations and needs of the members.

## Model Motion for a Black Officer in Your Union

Following is a model motion to set up a Black Students' Officer in your Union. It has been used successfully by a number of institutions already this year to win support for representation.

Whilst the job description is broad, you should bear in mind that Black students in your union may have specific needs. You can use this motion as a starting point, but consider your needs and adapt it as required. Remember to tailor the motion to your union's constitutional requirements too. You should ask your union president to outline for you what the constitutional rules are.

## Model Motion for a Black Students' Officer This Union Believes:

- 1. Black students experience racial discrimination and under representation in the education system and within society.
- 2. This Union should be for every student, and should be pro-active in combating discrimination and barriers to involvement.
- Having specific representation for Black students will empower them to be more involved in the Union, and highlight the problems they experience.
- 4. This Union has a moral duty to combat discrimination against its students, whether in the college, union or community.

#### This Union Resolves

1. To create a Black Students' Officer with this job description:

The Black Students' Officer will:

- Be an executive officer of the students' union and represent the needs and opinions of Black students to the executive.
- Convene and chair the Union's Black Students' Committee through which s/he will consult and liaise with Black students and canvass opinions in an appropriate manner.
- Scrutinise both the Union and college equal opps policies to ensure that they protect the rights and promote involvement of Black students; ensuring the equal opps policy is properly implemented at all times.
- Produce campaign materials to educate everyone about Black students' issues, particularly about discrimination and racism; and campaigns against under-representation.
- Work with the NUS Black Students' Campaign and organisations like the TUC, the National Assembly Against Racism (NAAR) and Equality and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) to support national initiatives.
- Ensure this Union fully engages in the democratic processes of the NUS Black Students' Campaign, e.g. submitting motions and sending delegates to conferences.
- Run appropriate campaigns specific to Black communities on campus, with full resources and support from this union.
- 2. The Black Students' Officer will be elected from among those students who are of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean heritage.
- 3. Only those students of African, Arab Asian and Caribbean heritage may stand for the post of Black Students' Officer.
- Create and fund a Black Students' Committee, membership of which will be open only to those students who are of African, Arab, Asian and Caribbean heritage.

### Contacts list

A few useful web sites and contacts to bear in mind when seeking to increase Black representation:

#### National Assembly Against Racism (NAAR)

Leading anti-racist organisation that supports victims of racism, and proactively challenges racism in society. www.naar.org.uk

#### Unite Against Fascism (UAF)

Broad based anti-fascist organisation composed of trade unions, political parties, faith communities, student and local groups to challenging the threat of the far-right BNP.

www.unite.org.uk

#### Equality and Human Rights Commission

Government body replacing the Commission for Racial Equality – with a remit to cover inequalities including racism.

www.equalityhumanrights.com

#### 1990 Trust

Leading Black human rights organisation which highlights and promotes the needs of African, Asian and Caribbean communities across the UK. www.blink.org.uk

#### Trade Union Congress (TUC)

Over-arching national union to which most unions are affiliated.

www.tuc.org.uk

# Campaigning for Black Students in Your Union – Top Tips!

#### Decide what you want to achieve

Set an overall aim. Decide whether your campaign is to be part of a local or national initiative. Do you want to raise awareness on a particular issue or do you want to change attitudes or influence decision-makers? How will you know when you've achieved your aims?

#### Do your research

How can you persuade others that an issue is important if you're not clear on the facts yourself? Ask NUS for help – make the most of the NUS Black Students' Officer. Look at information and links on our web site: http://www.nus.org.uk/Campaigns/Black-Students/

Use the expertise of external organisations. Do some research of your own – find out what the issues are on your campus by talking to your students. Find out about their experiences by using questionnaires or discussion forums. Be quantitative in your research, i.e. what percentage of Black students do/want 'x'? Conduct a participation audit comparing the percentage of Black students against the union's participation levels. If there are not many Black students evident on campus how can the Union ensure they are not being isolated?

These help your argument when influencing decisionmakers or raising awareness about issues. They also help you measure your campaign's success in making change.

#### Decide on your key messages

What do the audience of your campaign care about? Decide which angle is most likely to appeal and start to think of ways of communicating this. Draw on key facts from your research. Look to national campaigns for examples of messages, e.g. the main message from NUS Black Students' Campaign on representation is that there should be a Black Officer in Every Union. This raises awareness of underrepresentation perpetuating exclusion and inequality.

#### Make your objectives SMART

From your research and key messages, develop a strategy that will help achieve your overall aim. This will involve smaller steps (objectives) that should be SMART:

Specific - Make them as clear as possible. Measurable - Set indicators so you know how successful you've been.

Achievable - Are they realistic?

Resourced - Take account of your resources (money, materials, people helping).

Timely - set deadlines and meet them! Think about external factors e.g. term dates and requirements.

#### Put together a strategic campaign team

Set up a campaign team to manage the work and assign roles to each member. Ensure Black students are at the core of this.

#### Communication: Get your message out

What is the most effective media in your institution: posters, postcards, leaflets, the web, emails, t-shirts, stalls, events, displays, stunts? Think how to make your campaign materials striking. Do you have a union website? Could it be linked up to www.nusonline. co.uk? Who are the key people you want to hear your message? Adjust your message to the target audience. Which decision-maker do you need to write to/set up a meeting with?

#### Take action in the media

Do you have a student newspaper? Can you offer a ready-made article and image on your campaign issue? Get your campaign into the local press. Would your regional newspaper be interested in stirring up discussion about your campaign in the area? You could ask Bell (NUS Black Students' Officer) for a quote, or try the college, or local MP/MSP/AM.

#### Reach out

If you have a Black students' committee or group in your union, are you involving them? Does a committee need to be set up to campaign on these issues? Can you join forces with other unions in your area that are interested in the same campaign? Have a look in the NUS Guide for the contact details of local unions.

Would an external Black group be interested in joining forces with you (e.g. a local Black mentoring group)? Think about people in your community who could get involved, e.g. lecturers, community groups and dignitaries.

Use the NUS Black Students' Campaign Remember the Campaign is here to support your work as a Black Students' Officer. Contact Bellavia Ribeiro-Addy for information about national campaigns, materials you can use, and where to get details on Black students affairs, organisations and other unions campaigning on the same issues as you.

#### Evaluate

There are three ways of evaluating: process (did you carry out the tasks you set yourself?); member satisfaction (did the situation for Black students improve?), and impact (did you make actual change?).

Look back to your original aims – have you achieved them or is there more to do in a follow-up campaign? Talk to your team: how do you think the campaign went? What would you do differently next time? What would you keep the same? Could you do an opinion poll in your union newspaper/web site to find out what people thought of your campaign?



# Petition for a Black Students' Officer in Our Union

making up 20 per cent of the student population, the levels of representation of Black students on union executives and other public bodies remain pitifully low. Unless the student Black students face many challenges in education: chronic under-marking without anonymous marking; higher drop-out rates and larger levels of student debt, for longer. Despite union addresses under-representation, Black students will continue to miss out on academic and welfare support, and remain on the fringe of union activities.

We the undersigned support the campaign for a Black Students' Officer on our union executive.

	Course	Year	Signature	Ž	Name	Course	Year	Signature	



# Black Students' Committee Questionnaire

Please fill in this questionnaire so that we know what you want the Black Students' Committee to do. The form will be kept in confidence.

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Name:	Course:	I) What issues would you like the Black Students'					2) What sort of activities would you like the Black	☐ Training	3) Which day of the week would it suit you most fo	☐ Monday	4) What time would it most suit you for meetings	Uunchtime	5) If you have any more ideas please use the space			



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