

Students' Union Women's Officer Experience Survey 2016

**A look into the findings from our
survey into the experiences of
Women's officers across the UK in
full and part time roles.**

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Foreword

Women's officers in students' unions are a vital part of making NUS Women's Campaign effective. They are the feminist frontline, representing and campaigning for women students across the country.

Creating Women's officer roles in students' unions is crucial for making campuses liberated spaces and embedding women's representation in democracy and campaigns. However, these roles come with additional and specific pressures which students' unions need to acknowledge when providing support to Women's officers.

By definition, a Women's officer is expected to campaign against sexism on campus. However, that work is impossible to confine to a limited number of voluntary or paid hours because when you identify as a woman, you are likely to face discrimination and harassment as part of everyday sexism and because of your role. In addition, if it's a voluntary position (which the majority are), there is the added pressure of keeping up with exams, coursework, personal life and sometimes additional part-time paid work and/or caring responsibilities.

In this context it is necessary to engage in a wider conversation about things like generic officer training and how it may not be the best way to prepare women's officers for the year ahead, whether they are part-time or full-time. We need to also review the support students' unions and NUS provides to Women's officers and how it needs to be shaped more accordingly to common issues that Women's officers experience.

This is why we've surveyed 32 Women's officers from across England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland; higher and further education, full and part-time to gather their stories and thoughts about their roles. This was done via an online survey on our online SU Women's officer network group.

This report is going to cover four main areas:

- Officer Induction
- NUS Women's Officer Training Bootcamps
- Being a Women's Officer
- Officer Support

It concludes with recommendations for both students' unions and NUS which we hope many will incorporate to make the experiences of women's officers better and in turn help improve the experiences of all Women in further and higher education

Susuana Amoah
NUS National Women's Officer

Officer Induction

Officer induction is a very important part of the year as it's supposed to prepare officers for the year ahead by providing the information they need. NUS provides annual summer training for sabbatical officers and many students' unions often have internal officer induction programmes for their full and part-time officers.

NUS doesn't have an official summer induction programme aimed at part-time Women's officers, but full-time Women's officers can attend the sabbatical training. However, NUS does run Liberation activist days in the autumn. In autumn 2015, for the first time ever, we held a full-time Women's officer training day and two Women's officer training boot camps.

Students' Union

The average score out of 5 that women's officers gave their student's union for their induction was **2.2**. However, experiences varied; some women's officers had no inductions whereas others had fortnight long intense training so we've split the comments we received from the Women's officers according to their ratings.

Poor inductions

Many Women's officers who rated their SU officer inductions 2/5 or below talked about the fact they were given very generic inductions, information that was irrelevant to their role, or not given inductions at all. There were also a few who were elected through bi-elections and did not receive an induction because of that.

"Minimal. There was no official handover. There are no clear outlines of what is included in our role and what is not. As Women's officers, we are also members of trustees which automatically increases the workload for an unpaid part-time position. Little support network from the students' union as they were also overworked."

"We were given an introduction that was given to all PTOs. No liberation specific training was given and nothing that would help me campaign or support the students."

"I was sent to Lead & Change Presidents and had some training with the college about how their procedures work. There was no handover, no Women's committee to work with and no work to build on."

"PowerPoint that lasted 30 mins."

Standard inductions

Women's officers who rated their SU officer inductions 3 out of 5 talked about being given training that covered basic knowledge on how the students' union worked, but that the training lacked detailed information to do with their roles.

"We were given a small training session on behaviour as part of the students' union and a one on one meeting with the Welfare and Democratic officer."

"Made a drawing of what we wanted our goals to be and what we thought the obstacles were. Discussed how we can prevent burnout."

"Rushed. We went through everything in two weeks – I felt overwhelmed with some of the things, and there was a lot missing from my handover, some of it really basic."

"Quite thorough from my predecessor but not enough from the workplace about how to tackle the institution and make tangible changes, or manage relations between activist groups and institution."

Good inductions

Women's officers who rated above 4 out of 5 talked about how the quality of the handovers that they received made their induction experience positive. And specific information and training on campaigns, governance and personal skills and project management made them feel more confident for the year ahead.

"Basic week long induction, shared with full-timers as part of their lengthy intro. We had brief liberation training, a speed-dating style intro to all the senior managers, background info of the Guild, charity law and education act stuff."

"I had a really good handover with my predecessor and general campaigning and project management training from my students' union."

"Included things such as public speaking, social media, strategy and governance, the roles you play as an officer and lots of help in forming objectives."

"I was elected in a by-election, so it was different than usual. In depth chat with previous Women's officer and VP Wellbeing about the role, my wishes and their expectations."

NUS inductions

The average score out of 5 that Women's officers gave NUS for their induction was **3.1** out of 5. The full time Women's officers who attended the NUS summer training felt like much of it wasn't relevant to their role. Being mostly part-time Women's officers, some of them wrote that they did not receive any sort induction. Some of the respondents described attending other liberation events later in the year as their induction.

"I attended the Liberation day in October and the Women in Leadership conference in Sheffield, which were basically my induction!"

"Laughable. I went to Lead & Change, it was the biggest, most basic waste of 3 days."

"I was put in a first time officer group at Lead & Change. When I complained, I wasn't moved because only second time presidents were put in the second year group, apparently Women's officers aren't experienced or important enough for that... (pffft) so that was a complete waste of 3 days and a lot of my students' union's money because I learnt absolutely nothing and it was really frustrating. I felt under supported by NUS and the Women's campaign in my first year when I had a lot of difficulties navigating the university structures and dealing with a huge amount of sexual violence against students. Although I didn't really access it or ask for much help in my second year I felt like there was much more, mainly because Susuana was more settled into her role so reached out a bit more and made it obvious how to contact her and ask for support if I needed to. It was only really a safety blanket and I didn't need it but it made a big difference :)"

"I was added into a Women's officer network on Facebook which provided me with plenty of info about upcoming events, there was the boot camp, there was the Women in Leadership conference, access to plenty of resources such as the I <3 Consent pack on the website, lots of help."

"I don't think there was one, aside from the boot camp which occurred a few weeks after I began my term."

"Very good and extremely helpful, much more focused and in depth than what my students' union gave me."

NUS Women's Officer Training Boot Camp

The NUS Women's officer boot camp events provided a full day training event for Women's officers in students' unions. Women's officers were given the opportunity to build their skills and learn how to represent and campaign for women on their campuses as well as build valuable support networks. They were also able to learn more about the women's campaign projects and attend various workshops on topics such as lad culture, liberating the curriculum and creating intersectional local groups.

The average rating Women's officer gave for the boot camp **4.2** out of 5. In terms of how useful it was for them to be able to discuss issues with other Women's officers the majority agreed that it was very useful (the average rating was 4.5). We asked the Women's officers what they thought of the activities that they took part in at the boot camp:

"They were all really relevant to the work we were doing on campus, and it was really useful to do some role play exercises to learn how to deal with difficult people."

"The activities were great and they really helped me with the work I have done this year. I found it really useful meeting other Women's officers."

"Good – great way of discussing different issues being faced by women at university and practical solutions."

"Generally quite useful! It's the only NUS training I've ever been to that I found relevant and useful to my role and interests."

"The intersectionality workshop and the effective campaigning workshop were particularly useful. Liberating the curriculum was very interesting, though more practical advice on how to do this would have been better."

Lad Chester

During the NUS Women's boot camp, we ran an activity called Lad Chester where students were split into groups and engaged in a simulation of the year in the life as women's officer. They had to pretend that their teams were Women's campaigns and that they attended Lad Chester University working through numerous challenges including:

- Creating a plan for a brand new zero tolerance campaign
- Dealing with debating society inviting an anti-choice/transphobic speaker on campus
- A local club trying to promote a sexist freshers' event
- The university wanting the union to remove the role of the Women's officer and replacing it with an equalities officer
- The rugby club who have been banned previously want to be reinstated

When we asked the respondents to score out of five the usefulness of the Lad Chester activity the average rating was 4.2. We then asked them if any of the issues that were

raised in the Lad Chester activity came up during their year, and if so how they dealt with them:

"Sporting societies are always a problem, and union debating!"

"The rugby one was really useful as early into the job we had a similar situation in our SU."

"Yes - rugby scandal - press attention and consent workshops"

"We had a transphobic speaker visit because we don't have a no platform policy, we have a very small activist group all of who were too scared or burnt out to attend and protest/challenge the event."

"The no-platforming issue came up at my university this year. I was not able to handle it very well as constant media attention caused a lot of stress - advice on how to deal with your campaign getting negative media attention would be good."

We also asked them how they think the boot camp could have been improved:

"More time to socialise/activities which paired us up/a sort of speed-dating set up where we can chat but strengthen the network between us for the coming year."

"Would've rathered there was less on the agenda so we could fully explore what we did cover."

"I think it is absolutely great and very useful. It's also nice to meet other Women's officers around the country. In the future maybe including more stuff on self-care can be very useful."

"It would have been great if it could have been longer - maybe two days rather than one? But I understand that's not really practical."

"I realise this is almost impossible but perhaps more detailed resources on particular uni structures, also how to tackle things at a higher level, or also how to manage the political difficulties of being a go-to or in-between between activists and the institution"

"More talk about direct action and what to do when your SU/uni/local bigot won't listen to petitions/articles!"

"Less time on introductions and the boot camp should be somewhere other than London as a lot of what NUS does is quite London-centric and it isn't fair to other unions (particularly the nations)."

"Maybe offer more than one in a year, as there were some workshops I couldn't go to but would like to have a chance to again."

"A lot of information that I felt like I had to scramble to absorb just to be able to do my job for the rest of the year. It would be good to have the templates or slides online, so we can review and remind ourselves of the material later."

Being a Women's officer

When we asked them to rate their experiences of being a Women's officer out of 5 with the question "How much did you enjoy your term as Women's Officer?", the average rating was **3.8**.

40 things that Women's officers achieved for students on campus

1. Multiple Reclaim the Night Marches
2. Alternative SexEd campaign
3. Raising money for LGBT charity Broken Rainbow
4. Beginning the process of free childcare for students
5. Training students on domestic and sexual violence
6. Free periods in the union
7. Organised Women's Aid to visit campus
8. New digital consent campaign
9. Forwarding recommendations on sexual assault reporting pathways to university
10. Funding for online consent workshops for all freshers coming into halls in September
11. Hosted the Abortion Rights National Conference
12. Helped secure funding from the university for a new video for our anti-sexual harassment campaign
13. Funding for part-time staff to teach consent workshops for committees of clubs and societies
14. Student support worker within Manchester Rape Crisis.
15. Disclosure training and sexual violence awareness for halls tutors
16. Safe taxi scheme
17. Gender neutral toilets
18. Increased counselling services
19. Re-developing the English syllabus to include more diverse writers and examination methods
20. Black Women's panel event
21. Getting management to pass an institution-wide zero tolerance policy for sexual harassment, and adopt our action plan for challenging the culture of harassment here
22. Seeing the Women's campaign 'zine be really successful this year.
23. Intersectional Sexual Health campaign
24. Campaign for a full-time Women's officer
25. Publicising workshops about sexual abuse
26. Body confidence week
27. Rebranded the Women's Network to be more inclusive
28. Getting the college to review how sexual assaults complaints will be reported/responded to
29. Sports for women on campus campaign
30. Increased trans representation on the committee
31. Expanding zero tolerance sexual harassment policies in all SU venues to cover other liberation groups (sexism, racism, homophobia etc)
32. Women's Networking event
33. Women's week stalls
34. Writing & passing a motion supporting the decriminalisation of sex work
35. Held a Black Women's panel talk
36. Self-care workshop delivered by NUS
37. Feminist Freshers Week
38. Networking with local and national women's services
39. Signs promoting them as a breastfeeding space for parents on campus
40. #SheShouldRun campaign for SU Elections

When we asked Women's officers about what things made their time difficult, the following ten issues featured heavily:

- Lack of support from their institution and students' union
- Sexist attitudes of students against role
- Poor mental health
- Lack of ability to keep up with studies
- Online harassment
- Bureaucracy
- Lack of engagement from students
- Unpaid labour meaning very little time actually spent doing work
- Lack of funding for activities
- Needing nation specific help from Nations officers

"Clashes with others who disagreed with the way I do my job to the point of it becoming mild harassment."

"I'm not really sure what made it difficult, but I had days where I found it really hard to be at work to the point where I wanted to resign. I have a great team I work with and not sure how I would get through things without them. A lot of it is to do with online harassment I received, it was very racist, Islamophobic and sexist. In time I learnt how to deal with it. I also tend to overwork myself a lot without considering my self-care, again I work with a great team and we are always looking out for each other."

"A lot of the committee have been really noncommittal, and I've been understanding about work commitments, uni stress, illness, and made it clear that I will help with organising and that committee members are not expected to do anything single-handedly, but there are some people who have just completely dropped off the radar and it's been really disheartening."

"I feel like, because I'm an FTO people just assume that I have the capacity to do everything related to the Women's campaign when, in truth, I really don't... Supporting students who have experienced sexual violence is incredibly draining, simply due to the sheer numbers of indifferent and callous staff employed across this university."

"As a part-time sabbatical officer and trustee there isn't time in my 'working week' to create events, campaign, represent, run the Students' Union's daily activities, go to everything NUS runs, hear students and manage the strategic direction of the SU with only 2 staff members and a few other officers in similar positions."

"Those vocally against feminism and not understanding why there was a Women's officer, but not a men's, or why a man couldn't join the group."

"Being physically disabled and having mental health issues made it difficult, not because there weren't ways to accommodate me but because they weren't met, and I was made to feel like an outcast for asking."

"Significant media attention causing stress. Lack of attendance at events I ran. I also find it difficult to work to my own initiative, and as there is no guidance on how much time a week/month/term we should spend doing officer-related things from our union, it was often difficult to motivate myself to run campaigns / events – particularly towards the end of the year when I had to look for graduate jobs."

Support

We asked Women's officers what further support they would have liked from their students' unions during their term. Key themes that appeared within the responses were resources, access to development opportunities and the importance of supportive staff.

"Pay, so I didn't also have to work part-time to support my full-time degree."

"More support navigating the structure of the Guild, it's hard to deal with departments you're not used to when planning events, would be nice to be able to liaise with our Student Voice department / someone similar for help with this (we can sort of do that but they're stretched to capacity time wise a lot of the time as it is)"

"Campaign training and introductions to nursery, Athena Swan and women specific parts of the university rather than leave me to figure and find out for myself."

"Help in promoting the Network and our events, including other Liberation groups. Give us some level of priority so we don't have to chase after everything since we don't have time for that as part-time officers. It would have been nice to have a performance review throughout the year."

"A clear budget for our autonomous campaign, staff time set aside to support me in the way I support other student groups, stronger induction ensuring I know how everything works and what's available to me."

"I would have liked them to be offering to use their time to help us in drafting policy, meeting with senior management etc, rather than expecting us to do everything. This is especially true when we were being attacked and harassed by the student body, we needed support and for someone to take responsibility for the process. Their involvement seemed to make the harassment reporting process more complicated not less, plus then we had to babysit their feelings the whole time which was just ridiculous."

"There needs to be a support network in the students' union but also on a national scale. There needs to be more importance put on Liberation officers because people dismiss us all the time and we can't get any proper work done. Being a single officer working for 50 per cent of the university in a volunteering role is unbelievably hard as well as stressful."

Lack of resources

There was a clear recognition of the lack of support received by some Women's officers by their students' unions being linked to the lack of resources made available from students' unions in general. Also when some students' unions don't see liberation activity as priority it means that liberation officers are left to produce work without the funds or the staff support that is needed.

"Overall there needs to be more support for the Liberation groups since the lack of the students' union engagement makes them very frail and completely dependent on the individual that is in the part-time role. Since there is no accountability this means that the Networks can fall apart easily and the SU needs to be able to mitigate that."

"We are so underfunded and lack resources and support as a students' union in general that it is not for lack of want or trying that I had so little support. My SU champions liberation in an honest healthy way but simply isn't in a position to better support its Liberation sabbs."

"It's not my students' union's fault that it is underfunded and understaffed, it's the university's fault, however, the anxiety and stress of coming into the office to face an impossible workload has made even doing basic tasks impossible. I feel like I am constantly letting down campaigns and the other full-time officers and I think they think I do nothing but I find it hard to articulate the specific difficulties I face as a Women's officer."

Supportive staff make all the difference

Another common theme which appeared was that even though some Women's officers had gone through stressful situations, when they did receive a good level of support from staff, it made their experiences a lot easier to deal with.

"The Guild made a new role in the Student Voice department this year called the Campaigns Co-ordinator, but he sort of acts as an assistant to the part-timers if they need any help/advice. On more than one occasion he's been a lifesaver (figuratively speaking), I can't sing his praises enough and it was a great move on the Guild's behalf."

"My comms manager was excellent helping out monitor my Twitter when I received abuse and threats. That really helped me get through that period."

"We (currently) have a dedicated staff support member in our campaigns department, which is so useful and I'm so glad I have that. Our campaigns department on the whole is really amazing, and I just wish the rest of the students' union was similar."

Support from NUS

When we asked what support you would have liked from NUS during your term we found that many of the responses fell into the following categories:

- More communication about events and training
- More visits from the national and nations Women's officer
- Improve ways of sharing resources
- Better explanations of what NUS and NUS Women's campaign can provide in terms of support and information.

"More events around the North – a lot of NUS stuff is based down South and it's difficult to always travel."

"It would have been nice to have a full-time Women's officer meetup / network thing in the summer and then again later on in the year, but obviously it's really difficult to make a time that everyone can make."

"Maybe something like an official place to go to ask for a bit of friendly advice when dealing with issues in the Union / with the Women's association, Susuana has been a great help but closer contact from the Women's campaign committee would have been lovely so I wouldn't feel so bad going to Susuana about something seeing as she is obviously so busy. If they had a platform on the NUS website where we could get in touch, or if this already exists if it could be widely advertised, that would be a great help."

"Policy templates and ways of fact-checking/research. We suddenly had to be experts on everything, and while the Women's campaign Facebook group is a fantastic place for resources and plugging gaps in your knowledge, it's not indexable / searchable."

Recommendations

This report presents the findings of the experiences of 32 Women's officers across UK. It is not intended to be representative of all Women's officers' experiences and further research is needed in order to understand the variety and multiplicity of views about what it is like to be a women's officer within different further and higher and further education institutions. Despite the small sample size there are some initial indications that Women's officers may have particular training and support needs which are not being met.

	SU Induction	NUS Induction	WO Boot camp
Rating	2.2	3.1	4.2

Students' Unions

Overall, general officer inductions were variable and viewed as poor. In contrast, specific Women's officer training events were viewed more positively. In light of this we recommend that, as a minimum, students' unions should develop specific training for Women's officers that cover the following areas:

- Introduction to the role
- Structured handover with the previous year's officer
- Induction to staff structure, roles, responsibilities, what support is available to them across the organisation and how to request this
- Resources available and relevant processes and procedures to access (including expenses they can claim back)
- Knowledge about which staff and officers can offer support when dealing with harassment or abuse
- Training on how to support others e.g. First Respondent Training to deal with disclosures of sexual violence, Mental Health First Aid Training to support those in mental distress and sign posting to other services

Where possible students' unions should provide additional training on the following areas:

- Dealing with media enquiries
- Campaigns Strategy
- Union governance
- Communication
- Building intersectional campaigns
- NUS and NUS Liberation Campaigns
- Self-care

The findings from the survey also suggest that Women's officers may face particular challenges in their role, including sexist attitudes towards their position and online harassment. Women's officers were also seen to struggle with accessing the relevant resources or support to carry out their role effectively. We recommend that:

- Students' unions and their partner institutions have staff in place to support women's officers to address sexist or discriminatory behaviours, including having a clear harassment and disciplinary policy and procedure in place

- Students' unions take into account the difficulties of being a part time Women's officer and how they can support them manage their time effectively
- Students' unions should make sure Women's officers are treated equally to other sabbatical officers in their students' union. For example, Women's officers should have reasonable access to resources needed to carry out their work as well as access to development opportunities.

NUS

Responses to the survey outlined three key areas that NUS could improve on: communication; training and development opportunities; and officer support.

- NUS should ensure that it is communicating with students' unions about any development or training opportunities available to women's officers.
- NUS should also make sure it is communicating the work of the Women's campaign in more accessible ways.
- NUS Women's Officers (including nations) should create a practical system so that Women's officers across the UK receive regular physical or online check-ins from NUS.
- NUS should develop more 'winning the arguments' and briefings and FAQ articles that Women's officers can easily access.
- NUS should ensure that Women's officers know how to contact the NUS Women's Officer and what kind of support and information can be provided.
- NUS should make sure that training programmes which Women's officers are expected to attend are relevant to their roles.
- NUS should develop more official online networks for Women's officers to be a part of as well as looking way of how to sustain regional groups.
- NUS should develop more materials on cyber-bullying and harassment to equip SUs with the tools to make sure Women's officers can work without the fear of harassment and assault.

Appendix

Survey Questions

General Information

- Are you in a university or college?
- Are you a part time or full-time officer?
- Did you attend an NUS Women's Officer Boot camp?

Boot camp Evaluation

- Which Boot camp did you attend?
- What did you think of the activities that you took part in at the Boot camp?
- How would you rate the usefulness of the Boot camp's content?
- How useful was it for you to be able to discuss issues with other women's officers

Lad Chester

- How useful do you think the Lad Chester Activity was?
- Did any of the issues that were raised in the Lad Chester activity come up during your year? If so how did you deal with them?
- How do you think the boot camp could have been made better?

Women's Officer Activities

- How much did you enjoy your term as Women's Officer?
- What were your top three achievements as Women's Officer?
- What things made your time as women's officer difficult?

SU Support

- How would you rate the induction you got from your SU for your role?
- Can you describe the induction that your SU gave?
- How would you rate the support you got from your SU throughout your term?
- What further support would you have liked from your SU during your term?
- Do you have any other comments about support within your SU?

NUS Support

- How would you rate the support you got from NUS?
 - Can you describe the induction that your NUS gave?
 - What support would you have liked from your NUS during your term.
 - Do you have any other comments about support within your NUS?
-
- This survey is anonymous - are you ok with us using quotes for the final report?

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