

## Communities Committee Meeting 14.02.2022

Present: Chiedza Mhondoro (CM) (External Trustee), Ben Thomas (BT) (Vice-Chair), Keely Brown (KB) (Student Trustee), Alfie Whillis (AW) (President), Kirstin McCann (KM) (VP), Jack Simmonds (JS) (PGM President), Daniel Mercer (DM) (Communities Chair), China Luckman (CL) (Outreach Chair)

Agenda Point	Discussion
Feedback on inclusivity prompts	<p><b>KM:</b> When I joined there were no female external trustees, just white men. When I looked back through the emails, there were no candidates who weren't male from the last 3 years. I put out advertisements looking for female trustees with financial and legal experience, and while there were some with financial experience, there were none with legal experience. There were equally as many male candidates as female, even when I was looking specifically for female candidates.</p> <p><b>KB:</b> In the most recent round of nominations, we ended up with two more male trustees. There were three candidates, one of whom had just graduated but wasn't interviewed due to experience. All 3 were white male candidates, all had their own strengths, but we were happy with a diverse background - one was a year abroad Erasmus candidate, the other from a working-class background.</p> <p><b>KM:</b> All other than SR have been Cuth's alumni, and this has been a pattern – we have a problem in recruiting non-Cuth's students, we assume that we need people who have gone to Cuth's, but we don't actually need that.</p> <p><b>AW:</b> We discussed board composition at IndyComm. Other Common Rooms are trying to fill new boards, and may be exhausting the pool quickly. Although this may also be the case for us. Other Common Rooms don't have the same problem of only alumni applying, this is a unique problem for us – although we all have the same problem of mostly men applying. The problem in the past has been with a certain type of Cuth's person applying. They attract similar people, not only in their characteristics, but in the cultural background they come from – we have to ask what they think is acceptable, and how will they behave when they're on the board, and whether that aligns with our values and what we consider to be acceptable.</p>

**KB:** AW says they don't have the same problems with non-alumni applying – this may be a problem of our advertising. Respondents often say to us that they found the role through alumni networks. New independent Common Rooms with unfilled boards spent longer advertising the roles, and exhausted a lot more different avenues through which to get people. Others have done LinkedIn, but went through other organisations that help you to find you trustees, newspapers advertisements etc. as well. We didn't do that for the latest round – although I don't know what we did last time.

**CM:** You've highlighted the problem of recurring non-Cuth's alumni applying for trustee roles. We should be looking wider, making it explicit that were not only looking for Cuth's alumni to take up trustee positions?

**KM:** This is based largely on how we go about recruitment: I spoke to other common rooms when I was recruiting, and spoke to other nominations chairs to see how they did it. The most successful avenue was LinkedIn, but there are other avenues like law societies at unis, e.g., Newcastle uni law have good alumni connections. ICAW for chartered accountants, female specifically.

**CM:** Where we can advertise and how – we can talk about that later. When thinking about the range of communities in Cuth's, what are the challenges and complexities that you have faced?

**AW:** From a uni perspective – a lot of the problems relate to the general representation of Durham as a whole – it's hard to change the kind of people that come to Durham. A big problem is people's perceptions of Durham from the outside. People see the news and stories which creates a certain perception of Durham. When people who are worried about that come here, it's still a lingering worry. Even if they have a positive experience there's still a fear that something bad could happen. And ultimately, we're stuck with the unis admissions procedure.

**DM:** There is a preconceived notion of what Durham is and the kind of people that join in the JCR. When I joined there was no Working Class Students Society or Rep, I had to bring new life into the role and into the Working Class Students Society. It's about having an open forum for them to discuss, bring working-class students together to talk about their experiences. A personal fear for me is the fact that I'm in charge - when there's a role that is not filled, you risk that things fade away again. We adhere to uni wide trend of backgrounds, but people come to Cuth's in a different way. There is a lack of engagement through the JCR and with societies. Those spaces that make people feel safe can easily fade away, this I what I've tried to tackle in the role.

**AW:** Part of the problem with filling roles is that a lot of people don't have the appetite to fight these fights and set up societies and work on these things, they just want to get through their degree, especially if they have personal

difficulties. Why should they have to put in the labour in order to have a good experience? We do have communities, its about inspiring them to know they can do it, give them a reason to do it, and get them into the roles without making it sound like – ‘you can fix your own problems’, rather they need to be supported and valued.

**JS:** It's important to mention that Durham has issues with cultural complacency, from privilege, people not having cultural awareness, but also deep-rooted bigotry. Once you get a sense early on that college environments are not for you, they turn to uni-wide Associations. Important that people sometimes just want to get though their degree because it's a lot of emotional energy. But people also address the cultures outside of Common Rooms - in the wider uni, or even in a non-uni, non-college communities because they don't have the link to their college.

**AW:** Communications with the SU and Associations is very poor. If we strengthened the links we'd achieve a lot more, but there's a very hostile environment, unrelated to the issues were tackling, but about governance. A big challenge is making that work.

**KB:** People might not be involved in college stuff or with the JCR, but things such as the 93% Club, the Working-Class Students' Association do amazing stuff, but the people involved in those wouldn't necessarily be recognised in Cuth's. So while there are things going on, it is a question of how much of it is within our remit.

**CM:** The two biggest questions then are: how do you ensure roles don't fade away as you go on? And how do we inspire people to want to take up the fight? To move onto the final point, what are your experiences of becoming aware of blindspots in the JCR leadership team?

**AW:** We are lacking racial diversity, it's a very white exec. We do attract students from minority backgrounds more than other colleges. We have data on this but I can't share it. We have improved significantly, but we are ultimately still in Durham.

**KM:** There's only 250 black students in Durham.

**AW:** I think it's maybe 400 now. Still very low.

**KM:** Even though were more diverse than others, we're never going to be diverse while Durham is still lacking in diversity.

**AW:** Durham does have students from an ethnic minority background, for instance Asian students, but we still struggle to engage them in the JCR, a contributing factor is that international students don't often engage with the JCR, this has been a long-term problem in the JCR that we've always struggled with. Faith in Cuth's is another question - where does religious representation fit in? Do we want to do more for it in Cuth's, how can we work that into what we do? It's not a question often asked, and not really talked about. How disenfranchised do religious students feel, and how much demand is there for us to do things that are faith related?

**CM:** How did the question of a faith rep come up?

**KM:** In a JCR Communities Committee meeting someone brought up a religion and faith rep (PA or LM?) This was something we'd never discussed or seen in recent minutes.

**AW:** We concluded in that meeting that we couldn't think of a way that it would work or was appropriate.

**DM:** We discussed how to advertise it as a new role, questioned whether it could be like the culture and faith rep. Always the same question of how one person of one faith is going to represent all these different faiths. A difficult conversation to have anyway because it's so difficult to talk about how you represent communities. How it's implemented is a difficult one, whereas other ones have more obvious answers, faith rep is an interesting one to have because it will create an issue for electing one faith compared to others.

**BT:** I agree that it's always a question Communities Committee has to ask, has always been a problem with all the reps, for instance SwD, of how you can represent such a diverse range of experiences when you are only one person with your own experiences.

**CM:** How do we inadvertently not ostracise people is the question. In relation to the conversation about international students – why don't they engage that much?

**AW:** A lot of internationals in Durham are students from China, and having spoken to them they often consider language skills to be a barrier. Also hard when you have such a different culture and system coming over here. Fear of not fitting in, people won't accept you. This isn't that true when international students do actually get involved, but it can be a bit of a culture shock. Opens up a question relevant to the faith rep question – how much do we want to cater what we do to specific groups? Should we be putting on events for international vents, or should our existing events just be made more accessible to international students? About creating space for those who feel disenfranchised, and meeting people who

have the same background - but not using that as a get out of jail free card on other things not being inclusive and accessible. The deal world would be a JCR where people feel that they can get involved in anything.

**KB:** International student friends of mine have a running theme in a lack of understanding of how the college system works. Not all unis are collegiate, that could be a barrier as well.

**CM:** Any ideas about how to make our recruitment more inclusive? Practical solutions – anything to add?

**KM:** When advertising, make them targeted in what we're looking for. Saying that I'm looking for woman in finance did seem to work. If other colleges have an issue of mainly men applying, we could have looked at their pools of rejected good female candidates for people outside Cuth's.

**AW:** That might be easier when we have more independent JCRs running. Rejected candidates currently are the first attempts for struggling JCRs. We struggle to learn from anyone else as we're the leading JCR in Durham. In years when there are other independent Common Rooms, we might be in a stronger position to do this.

**KM:** Getting non-Cuth's alumni could be good – use LinkedIn. You could pay for adverts in a newspapers which would lead to better candidates.

**KB:** Would be nice to see if we had longer time – we were limited, and hence resources were largely focused alumni networks. It's hard as with other networks and websites as you need a longer time frame. Next time round will hopefully get a bigger pool.

**KM:** Expanding the board could help in some ways.

**AW:** I agree it's a good idea. One more external and one more student trustee. I'd like to see the student trustee appointed from the exec. This allows for more representation and means if you get a resignation it doesn't mess up the characteristic makeup of the board.

**CM:** Can you all go round and tell me one-by-one what you would like to see on the Board.

**KB:** Me and NT wants to see more interest in our student roles. And making sure we're targeting students and minority groups too, as well as making our role more visible in general.

**JS:** The obvious things that Durham as a community is severely lacking in, such as ethnic minorities, a more diverse range of sexualities, and gender identities on the board. There are lots of things going on in wider society that will play heavily on uni life and the ability to express gender and sexuality in a way safe. Rod Liddle had summed up the issues we're facing in terms of that. Not saying we should focus on one identity over another, but that we need to identify what Durham is lacking the most and aim to address those obvious shortcomings.

**DM:** I agree with JS – focus on the expansion for people of different minority backgrounds is key. As Working Class Students Rep at the moment, I think an issue is that trustees, and the board in general, when looking for people with financial expertise, often find in that sector that a lot of them are from a very old money background. As much as they have expertise, you need someone who doesn't come from the wealthiest background necessarily. To actually represent students of the society, having someone who represents a different financial background is important.

**CL:** More awareness of the board at a student level. Making sure people from certain minority groups don't only get involved in JCR positions specifically related to their identity. An awareness of the board among all students, even if they don't get involved in it during their time here, could encourage people to remember that it is an option once they've left too.

**BT:** I'd like to focus on student trustees, and encouraging people who may not normally consider the role to consider it and apply, rather than simply going towards role that they feel they should gravitate towards, especially those from minority groups.

**AW:** There's a general lack of faith in uni structures e.g., uni executive, when you make a complaint, it will be resolved, same for misconduct. Need to remember that trustees are for Cuth's JCR, they are the final appeal body, the oversight, help us to stay on track and that we're doing what we said we'd do. More visibility would be valuable, with a board that people have faith in to be the appeal, to be the oversight. On top of all the other issues, you need people attuned to the issues of 2022, who understand why things are offensive or unacceptable. Need to understand how issues play out in Durham uni right now. Visibility with cultural awareness means you have a board people can trust.

**KM:** Think the same as AW. Not just Cuth's alumni. People from Cuth's 20 years ago are very different with a different culture. We don't want people joining the board for the Cuth's they remember, but those who understand Cuth's culture for where it is now and where it has changed to.

