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Transcript

Seun Sowunmi

Hiya, welcome to the Oxford Student Voice, our podcast here at the SU where we bring students and staff from across the university to have honest conversations about prevalent issues in Oxford. My name is Shion and I'm the President for Undergraduates at the SU. Today, with the SU elections coming up, we're going to do something a little bit different. I'm joined by my fellow SABS, Alyssa and Shamar at the SU. Today we wanted to share with our listeners a little bit about our roles and get into the nooks and crannies of what we enjoy about student representation. But before we get into all that, let's go for a quick round of intros.

Alisa Brown

So hi, I'm Alisa, President for Welfare, Equity, Inclusion.

Shermar Pryce

And I'm Shermar, President for Communities and Common Rooms.

Seun Sowunmi

Okay, so let's jump into the questions. So what motivated you to run for office? Was there something specific that made you think, what, I just need to do something about this?

Shermar Pryce

Well, in my, in the second year of my undergrad studying PPE, I was the JCR president of Univ, which involved talking to college and bringing the sort of queries, questions and sort of.

Alisa Brown

Concerns.

Shermar Pryce

Concerns. that the student body had to the college and vice versa often. And I really wanted to do something similar to that on a grander scale. And the SU, being an SU sabbatical officer was basically that. So it was a bit of a no-brainer for me.

Alisa Brown

So for me, when I studied my master's here in evidence-based social intervention and policy evaluation, probably the longest degree titled in Oxford, I was very uncertain about my finances. and upon arriving within the first week I was very lucky to be informed that I had quite a large scholarship for my college and that completely changed my experience. I was able to partake in lots of different sports and activities, a couple formals and even the ball at the end of the year and I just know that my experience would have been like me stuck in a library living on Tesco baked beans if that hadn't happened to me. So it kind of opened my eyes as to like varying levels of student experience and how we could sort of bring everyone to at least a base level, which I don't think we are all at currently.

Seun Sowunmi

Next up, can you tell everyone just a little bit about what a typical day looks like for you as an SU president?

Alisa Brown

Committees.

Seun Sowunmi

Like lots and lots of them.

Alisa Brown

There's quite, like, within term time. Especially, we sit on various university senior committees and there's a range of them, right? And we get these papers. within a week, sometimes two days before the actual meeting. And they can range from like, I think the shortest one I've seen is maybe 40 pages and up to 300 pages. And you need to really understand the content of that and how things look in the wider university landscape instead of just like your own student experience. And then come with like constructive ideas and be able to say them in a way that Makes sense. What would you say?

Shermar Pryce

Yeah, no. And aside from that, we do a lot of stakeholder engagement because on these committees, there are all sorts of university and college figures and relationship building is often the best way of building trust and to make sure that our voices are heard and the things we ask for are actually action. And so these people can range from, you know, the vice chancellor, the registrar to college heads, senior tutors,

welfare leads. et cetera. And so a lot of our time is also spent, reaching out, having meetings and socialising with these people to make sure that our work is done, in the most efficient way possible. I think half the battle is sort of getting into these spaces to make sure our voices are actually heard.

Alisa Brown

And on that, like not just like going up and like saying stuff, but finding, the student perspective. So recently, I did a survey on people's experiences, students' experiences on the Proctor's office and how Proctor's handled non-academic misconduct. And so doing a review or analysis can shape discussions. We're able to contribute to papers as well. So I guess from a student perspective, you only see what we post on Instagram. We don't really post that kind of stuff. A lot of the meetings are confidential, although we do say where we've been. And also we have some student-facing stuff, right? Like events. Shane, you've got something in now. You've got something happening.

Seun Sowunmi

All I want for Oxmas, guys. All I want for Oxmas.

Alisa Brown

What's that?

Seun Sowunmi

Oh, sorry.

Alisa Brown

No, actually what is it?

Seun Sowunmi

Oh, so basically we're going to do a little library tour. So we're going to the Radcliffe Science Library, the Social Sciences Library. We're going to be outside the RadCam and in the Schwarzman Centre. over the next, over this week and next week. And we will be giving out lots of good Christmas, Christmas like candy and things like that. Mince pies? Yeah, lots of mince pies. I bought 100 today. And we will have a wishing tree where you can write on a gift tag what you would like to see from Oxford SU next year, or if there was one thing about Oxford that you could change, what would that thing be? We're very, very busy bees. And the next question is, what do you think there are the common misconceptions about the SU and your roles as sabbatical officers or our role as sabbatical officers?

Shermar Pryce

So I'm not really sure if it's a misconception, but there is a, thankfully it's not as much the case as it was last year, but there's a big idea that the SU is not really, there's no real purpose for it because as I'm sure everyone listening knows, you have common rooms in all of your college, you have your JCRs, if you're an undergrad and your MCRs, you do a lot of SU type work, so representing, running events and that sort of thing, you know. definitely holding the position which a lot of traditional students' unions at other universities hold. And so the idea is that Oxford SU is not really necessary. However, you know, being in the role, I've seen that there are so many spaces which other student representatives just aren't able to access for whatever reason. And without the student voice there, I think Oxford would be in a very different place in terms of student experience. And so having student reps in these places to not only be the bridge between colleges, but also on the central university level where there isn't, those structures, JCRs and MCRs don't quite reach, I think is incredibly important. And so I think that misconception hopefully won't exist once we're done.

Alisa Brown

I feel like, you know. We are quite united, as we should be, as a sabbatical officer team. And if we had collegiate representation in the same way fitting into those committees, well, firstly, the committees would be outnumbered. Some of these would be outnumbered by the students, and they might have quite differing opinions if they're in different places all the time. We're working nine to five in office together. We're discussing amongst ourselves sort of the best way forward. I would say the biggest misconception for me is we're the Oxford Union, the debating society, private members club effectively. And yeah, we're not Oxford Student Union. So that's one of the biggest misconception.

Seun Sowunmi

Thanks for the myth busting guys. So what has been the most surprising thing to you about your role so far? What's been the most surprising thing?

Alisa Brown

I mean, I keep banging on about it, but when I first came into the job, I looked at the list that the CEO sent me of all the committees I was going to be on. I was like, that is crazy. Like, I kind of thought, yeah, you know, we're representing, but I didn't really know exactly what kind of format that take. And as a student, you only see like the student facing side of things. Okay, I might be hosting events and maybe going to talks and things like that. But and going to dinners. There's actually less of them than I thought, but a good amount. Most of the dinners that we go to, like with the JCR and MCR presence, which is lovely. Yeah, that's probably the biggest misconception. No, that was the wrong question. Surprising. Surprise. The biggest surprise was probably the sheer number of committees. And then after joining post, there's been more like added.

And that's because transformation, they kind of did, I wouldn't say the bare minimum committees, but like what was statuted. And there was only two sabbatical officers in the end. So when I guess the university realized there was four of us, they started like adding. more on, which I quite enjoy, actually. It gives us a range of things.

Shermar Pryce

Yeah, so in terms of what I found most surprising, I definitely concur with that. The breadth of committee, but also the depth of them. So, you know, you have your, I don't know what to call basic, but your bread and butter committees, like, you know, education committee, senior tutors committee, and those sort of spaces where, you know, you'd expect some sort of student voice to be on, hopefully. But there are other sort of, I don't want to call them strange because they're quite essential, but other committees which you had no, you wouldn't have even thought that there is a student rep on this. So for example, curators of the university parks, which is a committee I saw on which basically looks at the university's green spaces. There's also information and digital, which is the committee which looks at the IT infrastructure of the university and how different programmes are rolled out to students such as the new ChatGPT 5 and many more aside from that. So that's probably my, that's what I call the biggest surprise, the depth of committees we saw.

Seun Sowunmi

I'd say for me the most surprising thing so far is that me and Alyssa are curators of the university libraries. I wouldn't have expected that. But I guess going back to student representation, so a big part of this role is about making sure that student voices are heard at the highest levels of the university. And it's really important that students are included in our decision making. And with that in mind, what is 1 concrete change or initiative that you're currently advocating for or hoping to make an impact on during your term?

Shermar Pryce

So for me, the big thing that I want to do a lot of work on is college monitoring and benchmarking. So as I'm sure every Oxford student is aware, what experience you get at this university is hugely dependent on which college you're at. And This is especially, well, this is relevant for virtually every group, so people applying to Oxford as well as student leaders, because you don't really know what to advocate for in your college, for example, if you're an MCR president, if you don't know what other colleges are doing. And a lot of the information out there becomes very quickly outdated because Oxford is such a sort of dynamic and fast, fast-changing place. And so I think the SU, you know, being able to sit on all these committees and having all the access it has to people like domestic bursars and people who provide services at colleges, I think we're very well placed to put all of that information together through, it could be like a website tool or

through a report or anything like that, which can then equip people with the knowledge they need to be able to navigate Oxford, whether you're applying and you want to know which college is the best for you. which is the most accessible, which has, the cheapest rent, or whether you're a student leader trying to advocate to move your college to what you describe as the ideal. I think that's the big thing that I want to work on.

Alisa Brown

That's definitely something that's come up in the representative committees. I was at the LGBTQ plus rep comm and the students there were quite concerned of cultures within colleges and where they would feel most accepted and how friendly those spaces were. So that's important. It's difficult to pick just one. There's quite a lot of things I really, really want to see. I want to see more fruit. I want to see sanctuary products in every university building. But I think the biggest change is actually a motion that I submitted yesterday in Common Rooms about the university having a central space to partake in sport because I think Iffley Road is really far away from students, from most students and quite frankly not fit for purpose. I've been to a lot of different universities and seen different sports centres in my time being a student and by far Oxford was the worst. So definitely improving what we've got. There's still loads of potential but having a space in the centre that's more accessible to everybody so you don't have to feel like you're an elite sports person to go use space. You can just use it casually on your lunch break, use it before your classes. I don't know how this is going to happen but I know the university are keen in prioritising sport where we have Alex Betts, we have now a Pro Vice Chancellor and one of his things in his portfolio is sport. I think, yeah, a lot of students are wanting to see change there. So if I can collaborate with the university and show them student opinion, hopefully we get funding and make change there.

Seun Sowunmi

Now, quick fire question round. Describe your role in three words. Go.

Shermar Pryce

Dynamic, challenging and enriching.

Alisa Brown

Welfare, equity and inclusion. That is my role in three words.

Seun Sowunmi

Our annual elections are coming up. which is why we're talking about our roles today. So I'm just going to end our session by asking, why do you think students should consider running in the SU elections, either for a part-time officer role or for a leadership role like a sabbatical officer?

Shermar Pryce

Well, I think the SU is outside of, you know, your common room committee is one of the few places where you can actually bring about change in a place which is sort of naturally resistant to change because it's been around for so long and it's so decentralized. And it's one of the few places I think, I don't want to sound profound, in life where you can see the fruits of your labour quite timely and easily if you start soon enough on a project and The doors that I think it opens within the university, I think, are immense just because of the people you can engage with, brilliant people, whether they be administrators or academics and that sort of thing. The keys it gives you, to access all these places, I think, is, Oxford is already a place which gives you access to things that you never would have otherwise been able to, access. And so the SU is just sort of a completely different level. So I'd highly recommend anyone who's interested in anything I've just said to apply.

Alisa Brown

Talent is everywhere, but opportunity is not, except here, at Altered. But it's true, like in these committees as well, you see very, very driven individuals that have had career, really amazing careers. And it's kind of a fast track, talk about the civil service, they talk about the civil service faster, but this is like 10 times. Like we're students who are going into these spaces and, you know, these staff have worked very hard to be there and they're very, they're quite senior as well. And we get to give our two pence, not just our two pence, obviously, but represent the other students. So it's just very powerful. I think that should be your main motivation when running. I mean, there's obviously the clout as well. Sometimes our videos get 20 likes. But yeah, that is the best motivation, I think, to run.

Seun Sowunmi

I'd say, like, for me, if you're thinking of running, like, it should be because you want to make change. And like, the SU is one of the really good places to do that. you can reach into colleges on the conference of colleges side and into the university as well. So if there's something you really want to change, like it's really cliché, but this is a chance to be the change you want to see in the world will be the change you want to see in Oxford. So thanks Shamar and Alyssa for sharing your insights. Like it was really amazing, like just hearing, even though I already knew a lot of the things, like it was just nice hearing you talk about it. about your experiences as SAPS and working in the SU and even running the elections. So personally, I really like working with this team and I'm excited to keep this year going strong. To our student listeners, I'd really love for you to get involved in our upcoming Hillary term elections. So whether that's through exercising your right to vote or even throwing your hat in the ring to become a SAB. So if you're interested in being a SAB or you have particular student issues you care about, head on

over to our website and fill out the expression of interest form. Thank you for listening and we'll see you all next time. Bye. See you.