

THE INTERNAL DEMOCRACY WORKING GROUP

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

In March 2004 the Management Committee set up an Internal Democracy Working Group. With specific reference to both the sixth form and university networks the group was asked to investigate the current state of participation and democracy within P&P and to make practicable proposals to enhance these ways of working.

The review focussed exclusively on the structures and effectiveness of democracy within People & Planet at a national level and from the perspective of enhancing democratic involvement of the student networks. For this reason we did not examine issues of democracy at group level, nor did we examine internal office structures. We have also aimed to make changes that are realistic and practicable, not burdensome.

This report makes a contribution to the extension and deepening of democracy within People & Planet but it is not the final word. In the future further changes will become desirable and we hope that this review will have laid strong foundations upon which others can subsequently build.

The understanding of democracy that guided our reflections is one that owes more to active participation than it does to membership with its associated formal procedures and methods. A stronger democracy within P&P will mean

- active engagement not just in group events and initiatives but at a national level
- informed decision-making on questions that are important and relevant to the network
- more inclusive ways of working, so that there is more extensive involvement in decision-making
- multiple levels of engagement, enabling individuals to engage in ways and on terms that are appropriate for them
- structures and processes that are clear, consistent and transparent
- improving our communications, putting more effort into telling students about P&P, how we work, and how they can engage
- better training so that the systems work better and, in turn, build confidence and interest amongst students

Current democratic systems were judged to be relatively strong from the perspective of university student involvement and in relation to specific areas of our work – such as campaigning. But there are recognised weaknesses too – our systems are broadly seen to be incoherent and poorly documented. There is very little opportunity for sixth form students to get involved with decision-making in People & Planet. And on the basis of feedback via the social audit process as well as direct comments to the review group, the Management Committee, a key element in our democratic structures is seen to be neither representative nor especially effective in terms of maximizing student involvement.

Working Group Proposals

The Management Committee

The Management Committee (MC), the key decision-making body within People & Planet, is responsible for the effective governance of all aspects of P&P's work, though it may delegate specific decisions to other components of our decision-making system such as the Management Team, the Director or the Forum.

Currently the MC comprises 12 people and the democratic involvement of the network hinges on two principal characteristics. Firstly, it is made up of 50% students and 50% non-students and, secondly, the student members are elected by the network.

The tenure of MC membership is different for the two categories of members. Student members are elected for one year and must then stand down. Non-student members do not have a designated term – hence they are sometimes called 'permanent'. The current scale of imbalance between the two categories is widely considered to be disproportionate. Other weaknesses of the current system are:

- there is no opportunity for sixth form students to stand for election
- the term of office – one year – is too short
- the current structure and election process blurs two quite different roles - that of regional rep. with its focus on supporting the network and that of MC member with its emphasis on governance and strategy
- the election process is unclear, undocumented and likely to restrict the range of candidates and the size of the 'electorate'.
- there is no mechanism to replace a student who is unable or unwilling to continue on the MC

Proposals

1. We retain the current 50/50 balance between student and non-student members of the MC. A student member may be either a sixth form or a university student.
2. We separate the role of regional rep from that of MC member.
3. The student members of the MC should be elected directly by the network. Any student can stand for election irrespective of whether they are a university or sixth form student.
4. Membership of the MC for both students and non-students should be for a designated period of tenure. Two years as the preferred term for students and a renewable term of three years for non-students.
5. If a student member wishes to stand down after one year, replacement is by election. If a student wants to withdraw during their period of tenure, the MC can co-opt a replacement student member.
6. Changes in the composition of the MC should be communicated promptly so that the network feels up-to-date and informed.
7. Designating one non-student member of the MC to be the first point of contact for student members for information and advice.

Campaigns Decisions

There is broad agreement that the student network should be more involved with campaign design so as to

- Make our campaigns more attractive to students and thus more likely to be run
- make campaigns more effective
- ensure that a core group of students understand and are excited by the campaign
- increase understanding of how to design and execute campaigns

It is proposed that we aim to create a campaign reference group for each of the campaign themes. Groups would be made up of Uni students, 6th form students and staff. Their role would be making decisions on campaign strategy, actions and materials and shortlisting campaign options for the Forum. The review team considered three ways in which these reference groups could work and recommends initial trialling of an approach that rests on intense work with a few groups to take decisions on the materials and actions.

With reference to decisions on new campaigns, the MC has historically devolved decision-making to a network event every spring (the Forum). We propose to keep this arrangement and the principal changes that this report recommends are primarily designed to formalise the existing process and to clarify the role of the Management Committee, the Management Team and the Campaigns team.

The key recommendation is the introduction of a more thorough and clearer process by which groups will be notified of the opportunity to make suggestions for which campaigns People & Planet should run. Members of Campaign Reference groups and Campaigns Team staff will read all proposals and short list a minimum of 2 campaign options per decision. This will ensure that a clear decision is offered. Short listing will be based on the criteria set out in the prevailing Campaign Strategy paper. At the Forum, delegates will choose one new strand/ theme to replace one that is being discontinued. Participants are expected to bear in mind the views of their groups but will make their own decision. Consensus will be aimed for, but there is no assumption that it must be reached.

Fundraising

Although fundraising is critically important to People & Planet there has been little opportunity for the network to be involved in this aspect of our work. Currently, decisions about P&P 's income and expenditure are taken primarily by staff.

For its income, People & Planet is heavily dependent on grants from external organisations. Such dependency militates against democratic involvement because a grants-based income structure emphasises the relationship between the P&P support office and the external donor with decisions being taken to meet donor's deadlines. Compliance with these deadlines and associated conditions are rarely conducive to extensive involvement of the network.

Nevertheless we acknowledge (and encourage) the interest of the network in the question of where People & Planet gets its money from and, in particular, in our links with corporate donors. We have started to discuss these ideas with regional reps and a small 'fundraising reference group'. We believe there is an ongoing role for such a group and propose that the Management Team should have the authority to set up ad hoc working groups (such as the current one on fundraising) on issues that are of organisational relevance as well as providing opportunities for regional reps. to be consulted on the policies which will guide our engagement with the corporate sector.

Projects outside of our regular programme of work

P&P has done some amazing work in this category, including the creation of Fair Share (on the basis of our earlier Ethics for USS campaign) and the Ethical Careers Service. Both of these examples have made a big impact, but do not fall into the general "students campaigning" remit of P&P. Similarly, there are areas of resource allocation which fall naturally outside the democratic structures, such as salaries, staff training budgets etc.

To bring these kind of initiatives into our formal structures we propose a formalisation of what already happens in practice: new initiatives should be approved by the Management Committee.

Student Network Roles

As key stakeholders, we want to create a diversity of roles for both university and sixth form students to have democratic input to our work. Currently we have mechanisms for university students to get involved both in supporting groups and in being a member of the Management Committee; but there are no existing mechanisms for sixth form students to get involved.

The report recommends that the support role and the governance role be separated. The support role will be centred on a revised role for the regional reps with a more defined role in preparing a regional plan to guide our work with each group, participating in the preparation of long-term strategy papers and structured consultation on operational issues. The report goes on to recommend the creation of a new category of university support volunteers who will have more limited responsibilities and are most likely to concentrate their support on one university.

Communications & training

For any of these proposals to be successful the participation of the student networks is essential. In turn this will require a new emphasis on

- communicating our democratic structure to groups
- training and support to allow effective participation
- clarity and transparency of consultation and decision-making processes
- an accessible timetable of events and processes.