**Scrutiny Report – Vice President Welfare: Amy Merchant**

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**Summary**

Amy was elected to the Vice-President Welfare role with a pledge to focus on student voice, community, and liberation. To a large extent, this has guided her activity in office and the influence of these priorities on the three major campaigns she has undertaken (‘Stop Housing Haste’, lobbying for change to University mental health policy, and the Lent term Liberation Arts project). Alongside these campaigns, which can be considered policy successes, she has addressed manifesto pledges to tackle certain student housing issues, engage with the work of the Liberation Forums, and promote various student campaigns. Others, however, such as reviving the ‘Out in Sport’ campaign, launching the pledged informational video campaign for students, and greater consultation with PG Board have either gone unaddressed or have been addressed only partially. Amy has, along with the entire Full-Time Officer (FTO) team, faced significant challenges as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and this has limited Amy’s ability to address certain areas of the VP Welfare remit. Nonetheless, Amy has taken the lead on the two of the campaigns that have resulted in headline successes of the 2020/21 FTO team and has perhaps been one of the most effective of all the current FTOs in terms of fulfilling her remit. There remains work to be done to fulfil remaining pledges and to prepare for the onset of the summer term, but Amy’s individual record in office so far has been largely positive.

 **Manifesto Commitments**

Amy ran in the FTO elections last year on a platform of focusing on housing, student well-being, and liberation/community, and her manifesto was accordingly divided into these three priority areas. On housing, Amy pledged to reduce the pressure on students to sign housing contracts before Christmas, and the ‘Stop Housing Haste’ campaign, which delayed the release of LUSU Living housing contracts until January was a significant success on this front. On well-being, Amy pledged to introduce a student informational video campaign called ‘How to adult at Lancaster’, intended to advise students on how to make the most of their time at Lancaster. This campaign did not materialise and this pledge was not acted upon. Whilst Amy has shared some relevant posts on her FTO Facebook page, it must be said that an informational campaign, especially on outlining things such as the Student’s Union Advice Service, would have been particularly helpful for students in the current climate. On liberation and community, Amy made various pledges. Her promise to support and publicise events organised by the Liberation Forums was met, with Amy publicising the Black History Month events organised by the BAME Forum. Her pledge to support the campaign to encourage the University to declare a climate emergency was also met, with this being enacted in November 2020. Two of her manifesto commitments in this area have not been met to the extent promised, however. The ‘Out in Sport’ campaign has not been revived as promised, though Amy did publicise Rainbow Laces Day on Facebook and sport at Lancaster has been restricted by the pandemic. Equally, Amy’s commitment to greater consultation with the PG Board has not been substantially met and the working relationship between PG Board and the FTOs has perhaps not been developed as much as it could have been.

**Activity**

During Michaelmas term, Amy’s work was perhaps most heavily concentrated on student housing. She launched the ‘Stop Housing Haste’ campaign in October and organised a demonstration on campus outside LUSU Living, which gathered some social media attention. Subsequently, she took a proposal to the Trustee Board to delay the release of Living properties until after Christmas which was passed, fulfilling one of Amy’s cornerstone manifesto pledges. Amy stresses that this campaign was a joint project which united the Full Time Officers, but fighting this issue was a personal interest and manifesto commitment of Amy’s which she was able to put into action. Beyond the Living contract delay, Amy’s campaign on housing included the putting together of a ‘Student Renters Toolkit’ to help students when looking for houses, and Amy asked the Student’s Union Advice Service to share information about this. This toolkit is a helpful resource and contains some key information for students, though it must be said that the Student’s Union could perhaps publicise this better. On a similar note, to improve the information available to students, the Student’s Union could update the LUSU Living page of its website as this still shows outdated information for the 2018/19 academic year, not taking into account the increase in rent that has occurred between then and 2020/21.1 In terms of Amy’s work on student housing campaigns however, it should be considered an achievement and there have been several policy successes in this area, including Amy taking the lead on rejecting a proposed 2% rent increase and freezing LUSU Living rents at current rates for a further year. Amy further showed her commitment to representing the student voice on housing issues by speaking at a rally in support of the student-led rent strike and by taking part in discussions with the rent strike organisers and University management, along with the Student’s Union President and VP Union Development, in order to encourage the University to listen to student concerns.

Amy was also involved with the delivery of food boxes to self-isolating students during Michaelmas term, when it became clear that the University’s policy of charging £17.95 for packages deemed less than adequate by many was leaving large numbers of vulnerable students behind. However, the Student’s Union was only able to step in and publicise its food box offering after several weeks of student campaigners being left to provide food to students on campus themselves. Whilst it was positive to see the Student’s Union eventually taking over this role and supporting their members, it must be said that this could perhaps have come sooner, though it would be unfair to suggest this was Amy’s responsibility.

Following the discussions with the University over the rent strike campaign, Amy was able to put together (with the other FTOs) a significant proposal on changing the University’s mental health and counselling policy, and conversations around this appear to have been very positive. Amy has lobbied for changes to policy in this area and has worked closely with the Well-being and Inclusivity team to ensure a more comprehensive and inclusive approach to mental health at Lancaster can be taken in future. If students are able to experience the results of this with improvements to the mental health and counselling services available on campus, this will be a significant success.

One of the aspects of her work that Amy has expressed the most pride and excitement about is the Liberation Arts project she has been co-ordinating for Lent term. She has particularly welcomed enthusiasm from students about this at a time when there isn’t an awful lot for students to be excited about. Amy envisages this campaign as a project driven by students, for students, and the emphasis has been on community and inclusivity. This has included the introduction of individual Libguides for each Forum, as well as events such as a book club and bingo night. Amy is especially optimistic about this project and hopes that it will inspire students in distinctly uninspiring times, drawing upon her own experiences of being inspired by the Forums as an undergraduate.

In terms of her working relationship with the Student’s Union, Amy feels that she has been well supported. She was apprehensive when entering the new working environment but has been pleasantly surprised and believes she has received adequate from the Student's Union Advice Service, the interim CEO, and in particular, the other FTOs.

In terms of transparency and engaging with students, Amy has regularly posted progress updates on her Facebook page and has been very vocal in sharing news of her successes.

**Challenges**

As with all the Full Time Officers, the most significant challenge to Amy’s work during her time in office has been the Covid-19 pandemic. This has made conducting in-person events impossible and has also raised challenges in terms of individual working environments. For instance, Amy had planned to co-ordinate a series of community events, but the onset of tougher lockdown restrictions made this unfeasible, and it is unclear whether such events will be possible before the end of Amy’s term in office. Amy is open about some of the significant difficulties she has faced as a result of the pandemic, and also about other challenges she has faced in office. One of these has been in finding and creating effective communication channels with students. Amy has been one of the most active FTOs on her official Facebook page, but beyond social media, she has found it difficult to reach the wider student body, which has been exacerbated by the pandemic. Equally, Amy has highlighted the potential difficulty of staying focussed on her own remit, especially when other officers are asking for assistance on other projects and occasionally seeking to delegate additional tasks. However, Amy appears to have found a good balance between assisting and supporting her fellow FTOs and concentrating on her own remit as VP Welfare.

The previous VP Welfare resigned before the end of their term, and therefore Amy did not have the usual handover process when taking up the role. Equally, the Student’s Union Welfare Policy Co-ordinator post, normally an important institutional support to the VP Welfare, was vacant when Amy took office, and she has therefore faced the additional challenge of having to adapt to a new role without some of the usual support afforded to new Full Time Officers.

**Targets for Lent and Summer Terms**

One of Amy’s priorities is to lay the groundwork for the ‘Stop Housing Haste’ campaign to continue into next year. She plans to create a student renting group and social media page, so that the project is sustainable, alongside a new student housing manifesto to push for further policy changes. Amy also intends to work on planning a suitable handover to the new FTO. She is planning to work with the new Welfare Policy Coordinator in the Student’s Union in order to put adequate preparations in place for the new officer. Amy did not have the usual handover process when she took on the VP Welfare role, so she wants to ensure that her successor is fully prepared to take over. Equally, Amy intends to work on passing on the Liberation Arts project over to the leadership of the Liberation and Campaign Officers so they can be taken forward into the future.

In terms of priorities for the remainder of the academic year, Amy has stressed that she intends to make responding to the student mental health crisis the core focus of her work. As part of this, she is seeking to continue developing a productive relationship with University well-being team and intends to lobby the University for further resources for students. She has also recognised the need for more student engagement and student feedback on her proposals, so building on this for the remainder of her term in office will be key.

**Recommendations**

Amy should continue to work on (and promote) the campaigns she has been involved in during her time in office, particularly the Stop Housing Haste campaign, so that these do not lose momentum and can be continued into the 2021/22 academic year as Amy intends. Her stated main priority of taking action to tackle the student mental health crisis will require a lot of attention and planning to address, and therefore Amy must prioritise certain aspects of her role over other activities to ensure she does not spread herself too thin. She has made a good start on this by outlining her main priorities but should be strategic in her approach to focussing on activity that will have the most impact for students.

To further commit to transparency, and perhaps make a record of her work and progress in office publicly available. Her social media updates have been good, but a more complete record of her work in office would likely be helpful to students in evaluating Amy’s term as VP Welfare overall. Explaining her approach and her priorities to her social media audience and the student body more broadly where possible, as she was able to do to her assigned Scrutiny Officers would likely be a very positive step towards more positive engagement. Amy has been keen to engage with student groups this year and extending this should be a priority for the remainder of the academic year.

It is clear that Amy will continue to work closely with her fellow Full-Time Officers in supporting the work that the entire FTO team is undertaking but she should also continue balancing this with addressing her own remit, which is something she has done effectively this year. Perhaps most importantly, Amy should not be afraid to challenge university management and the Student’s Union where necessary, as this is where she has had some of the most success this year, especially with her mental health policy proposal, and also her input on criticising the University well-being team’s proposed drugs and alcohol policy which she deemed inappropriate.

Overall, Amy has made good progress so far in her term as VP Welfare, especially despite the current pandemic circumstances. It is important that she now continues to focus on her stated priorities and remains committed to transparency and accountability going forward.