Diversifying the board at SOS-UK

Students Organising for Sustainability (SOS-UK) is a UK charity that empowers students to drive sustainability, social justice, and climate action within education and wider society. The charity was founded in 2020 and now has around 40 staff (including paid student staff) and a turnover of approximately £3 million.

The board currently has 10 members, with plans to expand to 14 to share the workload and strengthen representation.

Diversity as a founding principle

From its inception, SOS-UK recognised the intrinsic links between climate and racial justice and placed diversity and inclusion at the heart of its work. Black and People of Colour (BPOC), and other underrepresented voices were involved in shaping the charity's remit from the very beginning.

As a student-led organisation, SOS-UK is committed to ensuring its board reflects the diversity of students and young people across the UK.

How SOS-UK ensures diverse applications

1. **Engagement with Underrepresented Groups**
   SOS-UK works closely with young people, including those historically underrepresented in the environmental movement. Many prospective applicants are already engaged through activities such as school climate strikes.
2. **Guaranteed Interview Schemes**
   The charity operates ethnicity and disability-confident interview schemes, guaranteeing interviews for candidates who meet the minimum requirements. Over 50% of applicants opted into one or more of these schemes.
3. **Diverse Interview Panels**
   SOS-UK seeks to include a person of colour on interview panels for both staff and trustee recruitment. Although they have to be mindful not to place an additional burden on trustees and staff of colour, it is an intentional step to ensure fairness and representation.
4. **Flexibility and Accessibility**
   SOS-UK shares board responsibilities across a relatively large group, making the commitment manageable for busy students and young professionals.

5. **Reserved Places for Young People**
   Some board seats are reserved for those under 30 to guarantee meaningful youth representation.

6. **Inclusive Role Design**
   The charity regularly reviews role descriptions to ensure they are realistic and not inadvertently excluding candidates with excessive requirements. For instance, they ask whether requirements such as "10 years' finance experience" are truly necessary, avoiding barriers that would favour only older, highly experienced applicants.

7. **Term Limits for Fresh Perspectives**
   Board members serve staggered terms of one, two, or three years. This ensures fresh opportunities for new young people to join while retaining continuity and institutional knowledge.

Supporting less experienced board members

SOS-UK takes several steps to make trustees with less experience feel included and confident to contribute:

1. **Avoiding Tokenism**
   The organisation avoids tokenism by ensuring there is a diverse mix of identities and backgrounds represented on the board, creating a more balanced and supportive environment.

2. **Induction and Networking**
   New trustees receive a full induction. Although much of the work is online, they are invited to face-to-face events such as away days and festive gatherings (participation is optional). These help to build relationships and confidence.

3. **Flexibility**
   SOS-UK is mindful that trustees are often students or young professionals with busy schedules. Participation requirements are flexible to avoid excluding those with additional pressures.

4. **Empowerment and Support**
   Trustees are encouraged to propose new ideas and initiatives. For example, SOS-UK funded a camp for neurodivergent environmental campaigners based on a trustee's suggestion.

5. **Shared Values**
   Background checks are conducted to ensure trustees' values align with those of the student movement and do not pose reputational risks.

Impact of a diverse board

1. **Increased Trust**
   Staff and students see their identities reflected in the board, which builds trust and strengthens engagement with SOS-UK's mission.
2. **Better Decision-Making**
   Diversity brings a wide range of perspectives into governance, resulting in more inclusive and well-rounded decisions.
3. **Genuine Commitment**
   SOS-UK's actions demonstrate that diversity and inclusion are core values, not token gestures. These commitments are maintained even when they require additional effort or resources.

Reflections and advice

Head of People and Culture, Michelle Hemmingfield, shares key insights on what could make the board even more inclusive and effective:

1. **Compensation for Young Trustees**
   Finding legal ways to compensate young board members would make the opportunity more accessible and attract a broader range of candidates.
2. **Expanding the Board**
   Growing the board would bring in more perspectives, particularly from marginalised groups, while further distributing the workload.
3. **Commitment to Inclusion**
   Diversity alone is not enough; trustees must also share a commitment to inclusion and equity.
4. **Collective Responsibility**
   Diversity and inclusion should be a shared priority across the board, rather than a burden carried only by trustees from underrepresented backgrounds.