



**University of Hertfordshire Students' Union Board of Trustees Meeting
Thursday, 21st November 2024 on campus and via MS Teams**

Present:

- Dr Lucy Atkinson (LA)
- Hamnah Baig (HB)
- Santosh Kumar Gottapu (SKG)
- Zhora Jasper (ZJ)
- Muhammad Anas Khan (MAK)
- Rohit Mahadevu (RM)
- Umar Mohamad (UM)
- Rajiv Sudan (RS)
- Bob Walder (BW)
- Professor Mairi Watson (MW)

In attendance:

- Phillip Dowler, *Director of Advocacy and Opportunities, HSU (PD)*
- Sean Ferrie, *Director of Operations, HSU (SF)*
- Alison Godfrey, *Partner, Godfrey Wilson (AG)*
- Rebecca Hobbs, *Chief Executive Officer, HSU (RH)*
- Ansa Ithal, *incoming Student Trustee (AI)*
- Karen McKenna, *Secretary, HSU (KM)*
- Leena Patel, *Director of People and Resources, HSU (LP)*

1. Apologies for absence

Rikiba Bain-Caton

Non-Attendance

None

2. Declarations of Interest

None noted.

3. Minutes of the last meeting and actions arising

The Board of Trustees approved the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on Wednesday, 9th October 2024.

4. University Update

MW updated the Board on the current opportunities and challenges facing UH:

- Student Recruitment. This is very positive, especially in the context of competitors' positions and the Office for Students' expectation that 70% of universities will return a deficit budget in the next academic year. Because of delays by UKVI in processing visas from some territories and because of conflicts in some territories, some student passports were not returned in time and as such, International recruitment is approx. 400 students down on target, at 7,000 students. This is having an impact on all Schools, except for SPECS which is 500 students up on target. Home recruitment is approximately 200 students down on target. There is no change to capital investment plans, as a result, but the impact of the reduced recruitment is being explored within individual Schools. However, MW stressed that UH will not be reducing the quality of the student experience in any way across the university, but the team are working hard to ensure that UH can retain its positive cash position.
- Spectra building. The flagship building for the new School of Physics, Engineering and Computer Science is now open to students.
- Hertfordshire Medical School. The Health Research building will be repurposed to accommodate the Medical School. MW appeared on ITV News and on BBC Three Counties Radio in respect of the announcement that, in response to NHS need, UH have brought forward plans to launch the county's first medical school in 2026. Some of the programme will also be taught in the brand new multi-million-pound Health building, between Main Reception and Spectra. The Clinical Simulation Centre for training healthcare professionals has also been refurbished.
- Herts Unfiltered and School of Creative Arts. Feedback via Herts Unfiltered has confirmed a very positive student arrival experience. However, there has been feedback on disparity between some of the new and invested-in spaces and the experience of students in Creative Arts. Both MW and the Vice-Chancellor take these concerns extremely seriously and have walked the Creative Arts estate with the Head of Estates and the Dean of School to visualise the issues. Work is currently in progress, to the value of a capital £8m investment in the School, but this is undoubtedly disruptive and intrusive. MarComms are working to communicate better with students the substantial work that is underway.
- Graduations. The February Graduation Schedule runs from 18th-26th February 2025.
- Vice-Chancellor Recruitment. Final stage interviews are imminent. An announcement of a new appointee is expected before Christmas. Details of handover are to be worked through.
- New Community programme. This places UH front and centre to draw down opportunities for UH students with some of the biggest employers in the area, in order to maximise prospects and raise the university's profile. MW said this played into the need to work out more clearly what UH's civic and local footprint is, where impact is made on the local environment, where the university is improving local employment opportunities, how UH is retaining students in Hertfordshire after graduation, and how the university is demonstrating an impact with local businesses. RS noted that he is currently working with Affinity Water on a major infrastructure project and that they have expressed an interest in a collaboration with UH. MW thanked RS and asked him to contact her in order that she can facilitate a conversation with relevant colleagues.
- Strategic Plan 2025-2030. This will be launched to staff in January 2025 for a first look at the plan and the vision for the future. MW asked RH to share the invitation to attend the launch with all Trustees.

As ever, BW thanked MW wholeheartedly for sharing her open and most valuable update.

Signed Dated

5. October Management Accounts

The Board received an update from LP who highlighted the following:

- Drop in income mostly due to SU Networks, who specialise in the student market to offer marketing and sponsorship packages across multiple university campuses, where outstanding payments are pending but expected to be received shortly.
- Receipts from the recent very successful private hire of The Forum to Britannia Gym for a boxing event are also expected. Christmas parties for local employers are also booked in and the team are exploring all avenues to maximise this revenue stream. In response to RS, SF said that these events are never held at the expense of students because of the regular, weekly nights which are always 'protected'.
- Salary savings are seen in the Academic Experience department and the Student Events team.
- HSU is still looking to end the year on a positive of £3,403, taking into account the budgeted loss for Commercial.

6. Year-end accounts and Audit Report

RH reported that the Audit process had run very smoothly and was a positive process. However, some of the points that were brought forward by the auditors appeared at odds with how things are run and although they were correct to raise certain issues, conversations ensued about wording in the Management Letter. RH noted that Godfrey Wilson work with one other Students' Union in the sector, but it does not have a commercial entity. Both RH and RS said that the audit provision should be kept under review during the last year of the term and going forward, sector experience should perhaps be prioritised further. RH then welcomed Alison Godfrey, Partner, Godfrey Wilson, to the meeting.

MM and AG joined the meeting at 4.30 pm.

Firstly, AG thanked the HSU Finance team for their efficient and full support during the audit process. The Audit Opinion is unqualified.

The Board then received a presentation from AG on the Management Letter:

- *'USHU Enterprises Ltd made a trading loss of £3k in 23/24. The budget for 24/25 is anticipating a loss of £34k. At 31 July 2024, the intercompany balance owed to USHU was £211k.'* The Board should be mindful of the financial performance of its trading subsidiary. Under Charity law, a charity is not allowed to subsidise a loss-making trading subsidiary because charitable resources must be used for charitable purposes. It was noted that the trading subsidiary does have sufficient liquidity to repay the balance and that it would be sensible to return to frequent repayments of the intercompany balance to ensure that the debt does not build up over time. BW noted that the Board would monitor this closely and RH said that this has indeed been added to the Risk Register. AG said that it is understood that UH had, in principle, agreed to underwrite some of the losses of the trading subsidiary though this was not documented in a formal agreement.
- *'We welcome the external VAT review, which advised that floor space is a valid basis for allocation of business and non-business VAT...We also note that VAT advice obtained somewhat contradicts the accounting treatment applied by the charity for societies' funds.'* A VAT review was undertaken after last year's Audit, and this confirmed that

floor space was an appropriate basis for apportioning VAT between business and non-business activities. When this was reviewed as part of this year's audit, auditors noted that not all of the queries raised had been picked up in the advice which leaves HSU open to an element of risk. Auditors were of the opinion that the UH Block Grant should be a non-business income stream but is treated as a business activity and advice from the VAT review does not specifically address that point. Therefore, certain aspects of the VAT methodology could be open to challenge. Management Response suggested that recommendations from last year's audit were followed, and advice was deemed reasonable and fair at the time of consultation. In response to RS, AG said that there was much useful advice coming out of the VAT review and many points were covered off.

- In the Appendix, lower priority issues were raised:
 - The fixed asset register should be reviewed regularly as good practice.
 - In the previous year, there was some question about the Forum grant and whether that should go to the parent charity or the subsidiary. Auditors are now comfortable that this income is being reported in the right entity, but they acknowledge that there is no agreement in place which states that although HSU receives the money, it is allowed to pass that on to the trading subsidiary. It would be beneficial to have this in writing.
 - £86k of income had not been identified as restricted funds when posted to the accounting system, Xero. This is now included in Audit adjustment so showing correctly within the Accounts. Auditors recommend that all funding should be reviewed as it comes in and classified correctly.
 - An instance was noted where there was a netting off of restricted income and associated expenditure. This has been processed as an Audit adjustment and been corrected for.
 - A recommendation to review/monitor the accounting for restricted Income and expenditure in Xero.
 - A reminder to keep the Charities Commission register up to date when there are appointments and resignations of Trustees.
 - Audit adjustments made to the draft figures at the start of the Audit have been agreed with the Finance Team. There was one Unadjusted Error detected within Prepayments Control. Auditors extrapolated the error value to be approximately £4,600 and as such, and because this was below materiality, this was not processed within the Accounts.

BW thanked AG for her comprehensive review and asked for the Board's thanks to be passed on to the Godfrey Wilson Audit team for their support over the process.

MM, AG and MW left the meeting at 5.00 pm.

7. CEO Update

The Board received the CEO Update. RH highlighted the following:

- There are significant changes to Employer's National Insurance rates and thresholds which will affect HSU's budget from the 2025 financial year onward. Based on 2023/2024 salary expenses, these changes will increase Employers' NI costs across all staffing categories, including permanent staff, Union-employed student staff, and commercial student staff. The team are currently calculating the full impact and will present this in full at the next Board meeting. In the meantime, this has been added to the Risk Register.

- RS asked about a previous Board discussion around the nomenclature of the 'Black Students' Officer'. Understanding the issues that were raised at the time, RH reported that it was decided that the title should be retained, given that it was more inclusive considering the vast diversity amongst the student population. RS replied that he would like to ensure that HSU is inclusive enough to have such a discussion and that all such matters raised by the Board are followed up in a timely manner and reported back on.

8. Elected Officer report

The Board received a report on the activities of the Elected Officer team.

- RS asked for clarity on the problems for students surrounding AI as highlighted by RM. RM replied that there is a university AI policy, but it sits in 'middle ground', neither encouraging or discouraging its use and is not sufficiently clear or 'student-friendly'. RH went on to say that there had been such positive feedback on the impact that RM was having on the AI work. She thanked him for his hard work and commitment. In turn, RM thanked RH for her kind words and for her support and that of PD, along with the warm support of the Pro Vice-Chancellor Education and Student Experience.

9. Review of HSU Elections and Officer roles

The Board received a paper on the proposed changes to the HSU Officer structure for 2025-26 onwards. Highlights of the subsequent discussion included:

- ZJ said that they felt Recommendation 1 had more potential points of failure, particularly possible fraudulent electoral behaviour which may need the introduction of extra safeguards. PD replied that if this Recommendation is adopted, Byelaws and election rules and regulations will be reviewed to support what is put forward.
- RS asked how differentiation could take place if candidates are given the data to undertake their roles. PD said that it becomes more about how the student tackles the issue to achieve outcomes and solutions. BW added that the broader objectives can be kept the same for candidates but still give individuals the scope for their own slant and personal achievements.
- RM noted that sometimes there can be a level of resistance from Schools where personal connections and exposure is more limited. He said that he is very keen to help students in all Schools but it is not always easy to make an impact. This new approach should allow each School to make better connections and to feel that the Officer actually 'belongs' to them and is someone with whom they can collaborate. He concluded by saying that he felt that this School-level approach, aligned to the data-driven action planning, will allow for key issues and academic-specific needs to be met.
- UM said that he felt that the data-driven approach would very much help and support Officers in what is likely to be their first governance role. RM agreed but said that Officers do need the space to add fresh value. BW said he was a firm believer in this approach but noted that there are things that come up that spontaneously that cannot be measured.
- HB said that she felt that the new recommendations would help, from an SCOs perspective, to allow a pairing with an Officer who completely understands the School. For Academic Board, it will also maintain a continuity of Officers. She also noted that this approach would allow an Officer to attend one induction for the School rather than the team attempting to cover all inductions, without any prior knowledge of the Schools. HB went on to say that she would be interested in the finer details of how Elections would run in a

true and fair way and how Officers would be supported.

- RS said that this review would ultimately lead to some demographic roles disappearing and that the team must ensure sufficient stakeholder engagement, as some students will undoubtedly identify with particular Officers and become disengaged when roles change. HB noted that there still is a race equity role which will work for all students.
- RS flagged that understanding of the Byelaws should form part of the Officer induction pack to give greater insight into the framework of HSU.
- RS went on to ask that in the event of a complaint made against an Officer how matters are escalated. RH replied that, when this does happen, HSU has an efficient process in place to deal with such issues. This links to UH processes where appropriate.
- BW said that although this report concludes a two-year trial, HSU should consider that it is a continual review period which is never fixed, due to the constantly changing environment and student cohort.
- RH thanked PD for his hard work and efforts in this complex area.

The Board approved the introduction of a new HSU Officer structure for 2025-26.

10. Risk Register

The Board received the latest iteration of the Risk Register. RH highlighted the following:

- A 3.1% tuition fee increase for Home undergraduate students will take effect for the 2025-26 academic year. Whilst there has been limited feedback from students at this point, RH said it was important to keep this under review as this could impact student perceptions and engagement with HSU. She said it was probably the first of multiple announcements to come as to how Higher Education fees are allocated and awarded.
- The two points coming out of the Audit, namely the VAT review and the financial performance of The Forum, have also been added.

Highlights of the subsequent discussion:

- LP reported on bank verification processes with Santander who are blocking accounts, for up to ten days, because of the number of rotational directorships taking place amongst Officers quarterly. This has flagged HSU as a risk but as RH noted, is an unintended consequence of what is, otherwise, a really positive approach to student representation. RS noted this is most certainly a risk if sub-contractors are not being paid which may, in turn, impact HSU's credit rating. LP is exploring options and will make a recommendation to the Board at the next meeting. RH to add to the Risk Register. RH
- LA raised the issue of Foundation year students who are likely to see their tuition fees going down in September 2025, although this has not been fully confirmed as yet. She suggested that Foundation year students may see this as a disadvantage in that they may revert to HSU to clarify if they will continue to receive their teaching and support on reduced fees. RH thanked LA for raising this issue and said that she would add it to the Risk Register. RH

11. Health and Safety Policy

The Board received the updated Health and Safety Policy for 2024-25. SF highlighted the change of emphasis around Manager ownership and responsibilities, particularly for sub-contractors and third parties coming on to site. For 2023-24, UH recognised the efficacy and completeness of the Policy in place.

Highlights of the subsequent discussion included:

- UM asked how, once the Policy was approved, it is disseminated to staff. SF replied that this the document is available via the HR portal and SF oversees and observes daily and weekly, ensuring adherence and good practice across the board. He went on to say that Health and Safety training is included in induction materials and certain modules renew every six months or annually and are tracked accordingly.
- RS queried the duties and authority allocated to a number of managers, rather than one named individual. SF replied that he was ultimately responsible for managing Health and Safety. LP also highlighted that as a small team, there is very close collaboration. She said she was very proud of HSU's Health and Safety provision.
- RS highlighted that in the most forward-thinking organisations there are introductory Health and Safety 'moments' at the beginning of meetings to share a focus at every opportunity. This may be something the team want to consider.

The Board approved the Policy for the academic year.

12. Byelaws update

The Board received a paper on updates to Byelaws. PD highlighted the following:

- There will be a more substantial review of Byelaws, but an update will aid delivery of activities and resolve certain conflicts of interest for this academic year, whilst initiating a regularity of review.
- There are no changes to the content of Byelaws 2 and 6.
- It is recommended to remove Byelaw 7 as Associations do not exist and so this Byelaw is not necessary.

The Board approved the recommendations to be implemented in the 2025 Elections.

13. AOB

- On behalf of the Board, BW thanked HB for her immense and impressive contributions to the Board as her term of office concludes. RH echoed this and passed on her warmest wishes for HB's future success.

Meeting closed at 6.00 pm.

Next Meeting: Thursday, 27th February 2025

Dates for 2024/25 academic year – all meetings run from 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm

Wednesday, 9th April 2025
 Thursday, 29th May 2025
 Thursday, 26th June 2025