



University of Hertfordshire Students' Union Board of Trustees Meeting
Wednesday, 25th November 2020 via MS Teams

Present:

- Maryam Ateeq (MA)
- David Ball (DB)
- Karthik Kumar Bonkur (KB)
- Sarah Fuell (SF)
- Stephen Isaacs (SI)
- Bobbie Jay (BJ)
- Kayleigh Malone (KM)
- Simon Petar (SP)
- Saad Raees (SR)
- Bishal Saha (BS)
- Dr Mairi Watson (MW)

In attendance:

- Rebecca Hobbs, *Chief Executive Officer, HSU* (RH)
- Luke Delderfield, *Head of Operations, HSU* (LD)
- Steve Owen, *Head of Student Services, HSU* (SO)
- Leena Patel, *Head of People and Resources, HSU* (LP)
- Karen McKenna, *Secretary* (KMCK)

1. Apologies for absence

None

Non-Attendance

None

Welcome

DB welcomed Trustees to the meeting. He confirmed that LD is leaving his post imminently and, on behalf of the Board, he offered his sincere thanks for the fantastic work LD has undertaken during his time with HSU, particularly this year given the challenging operational conditions. RH echoed this, noting LD's instrumental role with HSU since he joined the organisation in 2013 and she noted that he would be sorely missed.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Minutes of the previous meeting

The Board approved the Minutes from the previous meeting held on Wednesday, 28th October 2020 at 4.00 pm.

4. CEO Update (Paper 1)

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

- The format of the CEO report. RH highlighted the reformatted report as a review of the four key areas that HSU's Strategy speaks to.
- The KPI dashboard. She highlighted the RAG ratings marked in 'amber' where work, namely surveys on wellbeing and student identity as members of HSU, is yet to commence. Equally, the research around achieving an NSS score within the top quartile of all HE's Students Unions has not yet been undertaken. She asked the Board to note that the RAG rating for the KPI centred on at least 60% of students engaging with at least one HSU service per year was both 'red' and 'green'. Good progress is being made in terms of digital engagement with Societies, Student Reps and the Advice and Support Centre. However, the 'red' rating is the result of Forum attendance given that the venue is closed. She highlighted the three-year target with a 54% target in 2020/21 and said that this should be kept under review as it may be necessary to revise this KPI downward, although in categories that are unrelated to the Forum HSU will likely meet or exceed respective targets.
- Advice and Support Centre. Casework is going from strength to strength and remains fully online which will continue even when distancing measures are relaxed in the future. UH has been proactive in supportively directing students to the Centre when required, alongside the Centre team working with academic colleagues in the Schools to raise their profile. The Buddy Scheme has been extremely successful, matching 100 'buddies' with a further 100 newly recruited and in the process of being trained. This demand has not been seen previously (in a typical year, there are approximately 40/50 'buddies') and as such, the scheme has been temporarily curtailed to allow it to catch up.
- Student Insight and Voice. Feedback from students in the form of the Student Academic Success Survey (SASS) has been collated to examine students' academic experiences, as blended learning progresses, and this has been compared with their views at the end of the last academic year. SO will report to the Board later in the meeting.
- Student communities. Society memberships continue to flourish and there is a wide and varied online Activities programme.
- Finance and HR systems redevelopment. HSU is working towards paper-free with completely cloud-based Finance and HR systems.
- 'Welcome to Herts SU video'. Marketing have been showcasing all the different services HSU offer in a video which was shared across website and social media channels. This was also shared by Wonkhe as an example of good practice.
- Mental Health Resource Kit. This resource is being developed collaboratively with UH to signpost students towards the variety of mental health services across HSU and UH.
- BAME Student Journey research. This is a three-strand project focusing on Wellbeing, Academic Interests and the Awarding Gap. The first survey is currently underway and will be followed up by focus groups in early 2021.
- Virtual activity programme for the holidays. A programme is being developed for students to join in with, wherever they are in the world.

- HSU is working towards National Centre of Diversity accreditation and the Quality Students' Union accreditation run by NUS.

In response to DB, RH said that HSU was now in a much stronger position with a strong management team and well-practiced in being agile and responsive to change to now comfortably take up the new initiatives she had outlined. She said the team considered these a good 'temperature check' to benchmark against the current three-year Strategy. MW said that she agreed that it was a difficult balance to deal with the presenting challenges and introducing new initiatives simultaneously but she said, from her perspective, she was incredibly grateful for HSU's continuing stamina on pushing forward on the commitments of the Sabbatical Officers and the range of upcoming projects. She went on to say that one of the successes of this difficult year had been in continuing to push back on areas where there has been dissatisfaction whilst continuing to operate effectively to further progress.

5. Sabbatical Officer updates (Papers 2a-2d)

The Board received the Sabbatical Officer updates. Highlights of the subsequent discussion included:

- MW commended KB for his work on the international student experience.
- DB also commended SR's plan for a Postgraduate Network to enable postgraduates to interact and share ideas/concerns etc.
- DB asked KM if she had any insight into how serious an issue mental health and wellbeing was currently for students. She replied that more now than ever, with students more isolated than ever before and with limited interaction, mental wellbeing was crucial and she said she felt it was fundamental to HSU's remit. She said she hoped that the Mental Health Resource Kit would offer a pathway for students to seek help they needed. In response to SP, KM said that with the toolkit resource now well into development, there was little further input the Board needed to contribute. However, she said she felt that promotion of the toolkit within UH was absolutely key to signposting students to the resource. MW concurred.
- MA raised the issues of concerns and queries held by placement students. DB asked MA to discuss this with SR and KM outside of the meeting.
- MW congratulated BJ on the energy and enthusiasm he had put into the Activities programme.

DB thanked the Officers, noting their exceptionally busy agendas, for all they were doing to represent the student voice at all levels around the university.

6. University Update

MW opened by saying how effective she felt the Sabbatical Officer team has been this year so far. She highlighted the excellent channels of open communication and said she was much enjoying the developing relationship between HSU and UH. She also expressed her appreciation for the Board in allowing the Sabbatical Officers' Priority Campaigns to become a standing item on the Education and Student Experience Committee which frame the discussions at those meetings.

MW went on to update the Board as follows:

- National Lockdown. Sabbatical Officers were involved in the early conversations around

how UH would shape the approach to teaching and learning during the second lockdown. UH ultimately made the decision to sustain all teaching and learning at Level 4 (first year undergraduate), Level 7 (first year postgraduate) and in all programmes with all practical elements but to move a small amount online at Levels 5 and 6. MW expressed her thanks to HSU for the very thorough survey conducted of the student experience at this time.

- National 'travel window' for students and asymptomatic testing programme. Between 3rd and 9th December, students are permitted to travel home for Christmas. There are approximately 9k students either in accommodation on campus or locally who may travel home. Asymptomatic testing programme meetings are taking place daily, with RH and KM attending, to plan how students will be given access to the programme. This will start from Monday, 30th November with kit, booths and staffing in place. Invitations to book are being sent out to students imminently. Four schools (Law, Business, Humanities and Physics, Engineering and Computer Science) are going fully online from 30th November with the remaining four schools (Education, Life and Medical Science, Health and Social Work and Creative Arts) going fully online on 7th December. It is a Government imperative that all teaching is online by 9th December. UH will support educational placements to continue beyond this date and a small number of activities to support students who are going on to placement in January will also continue.
- Government guidance for return to campus after Christmas. It is not yet known what the Government imperatives will be about teaching and learning after Christmas but UH are expecting a staged return to campus. Preparatory work with the Deans is underway on the impact of a further mandatory 'travel window' for students after Christmas.
- Approval for a new KPI on blended/flexible learning. This commits MW and her teams to deliver a blended/flexible learning experience to all students before the end of the Strategic Plan. In the current academic year, practice that was introduced earlier in the year is being reviewed and consolidated so within the next two years, there will be an institutional approach to blended/flexible learning that UH can articulate and roll out across all of the Schools.
- The National Student Survey. MW noted that she has agreed the additional bank of optional questions which surround mental health and access to support services, teaching and learning and employability.
- Government recommendations on post-qualification offers. Government are currently reviewing the process by which universities make offers to students. In the future, it is likely that offers will not be confirmed until after the release of A-level results. The UH Vice-Chancellor is leading on the consultation document.
- BS raised the issue of access to library services with MW. She noted that UH take students' access to the Learning and Resource Centres very seriously indeed and any changes to access during this semester are always discussed at the 'Gold' Incident Management Group. She flagged the difficult balance there is to maintain between safety and security and accessibility to resources. She said she would take BS's feedback to the Chief Information Officer with responsibility for the LRCs.

7. Feedback from HSU Student Satisfaction Survey (Paper 3)

The Board received Paper 3. SO noted there were over 1200 responses to the survey, distributed in October 2020. He took the Board through the findings.

DB thanked SO for his presentation and congratulated the team on such a large and important piece of work.

8. October 2020 Management Accounts / early forecast (Paper 4a and 4b)

RH gave an update on the year-to-date position. She noted:

- October was a relatively positive month, tracking a little ahead of budget, feeding into the year-to-date surplus of £24k against a budgeted deficit of £11k, a £36k difference. This is partially due to phasing issues but primarily due to budget allocations originally being made in March for activities that were expected to take place face-to-face. Although the majority of these activities have now moved online, there is still budget allocation for face-to-face activities should these be able to return.
- Investment is commencing in digital support for student and staff.
- An £8k surplus is forecast against the originally budgeted for figure of a £55k deficit. The difference has been driven by the change in face-to-face activity, monies from the furlough scheme and a reduction in the numbers of student staff normally employed. RH highlighted that this position is carefully monitored, particularly as HSU are in danger of breaching the Reserves policy which states that HSU should not retain more than 10% of the Block Grant at any one time. She noted her concern that exceeding this figure in essence suggests that HSU are not adequately investing in students. DB said that he was pleased to see the positive forecast but agreed that the surplus should be monitored. SF noted that the positive surplus was the second year running that this has been the position and includes the commercial loss from the Forum. She noted that she had asked the Sabbatical Officers to consider projects that some of the surplus could be spent on. Furthermore, SF said that she had suggested to RH that it may be beneficial to consider moving some of the surplus monies into a reserve account to offset some of the pension deficit. DB concurred. SI said that he understood that HSU was an organisation that should not hold profit and absolutely endorsed the suggestion that surplus should be spent on students. However, he suggested that HSU should consider carefully exactly how much of the current surplus is spent in the next financial year given the challenging national picture and with a view to the financial future. He said he would welcome a discussion with the Sabbatical Officers about their recommendations on where the surplus should be allocated. DB thanked SI and noted that it would be possible to engage with UH to advise if more reserves are held than has been the case previously.
- SP asked if there had been funds put aside to help with the administration of vaccines. RH replied that HSU's support would lie more with lending the student voice to conversations about how a vaccine programme might be rolled out. MW noted that the asymptomatic testing programme was likely to continue after Christmas until a vaccine programme is introduced and that costs were covered for a proportion of the expenditure. She reported that UH were in early discussions, having been approached by two parts of the health infrastructure, to host a vaccine administering site which would be run for the wider public community. UH's role would also be in positive messaging to encourage uptake of a vaccine. However, the student demographic would be one of the last groups to have access to the vaccine of course.

9. Annual HSU Statement of Compliance (Paper 5)

In introducing Paper 5, DB noted that one of the Board's key responsibilities is to ensure that as an organisation HSU is legally compliant. RH stressed that this is a significantly important issue and document, with Trustees ultimately assuming responsibility. She noted that HSU's consideration of obligation can be categorised into four main areas: obligations as a charity; obligations as an employer; obligations as a licenced venue operator and an activities provider; and obligations as a Students' Union. Paper 5 outlines all the obligations under these areas and shows how HSU is

Hertfordshire Students' Union Board of Trustees – Wednesday, 25/11/20

meeting these. Failure to meet these obligations could result in significant financial difficulty in terms of loss of income or fines etc and exposure for HSU. DB asked Trustees to feedback any concerns, issues or omissions to himself and RH by Wednesday, 9th December. This will allow feedback to be incorporated before RH submits the document to UH's Audit and Risk Committee in advance of the next meeting in January 2021.

10. Risk Register to include Covid Risk Register (Paper 6)

In introducing Paper 6, RH noted that the document was examined at the recent Finance and Audit Committee meeting. RH drew the Board's attention to the fact that the document remains a split Risk Register between HSU and risks particularly ascertaining to the pandemic. She highlighted the following:

- The SUSS Pension Scheme revaluation had now been received with an increase in the deficit. This is being dealt with through increased payments and an extension to the overall payment period from an outstanding 13-year payment period to a 15-year payment period. UH's Finance Director is aware of the issue.
- The Covid Risk Register is split between Student Advocacy, HSU staff risk, HSU activity and finances.

DB thanked RH and her team for their considerable work on this.

He asked Trustees to once again feedback any concerns, issues or omissions to himself and RH by Wednesday, 9th December. This will allow feedback to be incorporated before RH submits the document to UH's Audit and Risk Committee in advance of the next meeting in January 2021.

11. AOB

The Board agreed to reappoint Hillier Hopkins LLP for one further year. However, consideration would be given to initiating a tender process to source another supplier for future years.

Meeting closed at 6.00 pm.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, 24th February 2021 – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm

Dates for academic year 2020/2021:

Wednesday, 5th May 2021 – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm

Wednesday, 23rd June 2021 – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm