



**University of Hertfordshire Students' Union Board of Trustees Meeting
Tuesday, 6th July 2021 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)
- Saad Raees (SR)
- Bishal Saha (BS)
- Dr Mairi Watson (MW)

In attendance:

- Rebecca Hobbs, *Chief Executive Officer, HSU* (RH)
- Steve Owen, *Head of Student Services, HSU* (SO)
- Junaid Ahmed, *incoming VP Activities, HSU* (JA)
- Rhiannon Ellis, *incoming President, HSU* (RE)
- Prosasti Ganguly, *incoming VP Community, HSU* (PG)
- Zara Haram Syeda, *incoming VP Education, HSU* (ZHS)
- Katie Morton, *incoming Student Trustee, HSU* (KMo)
- Victoria Udeh, *incoming Student Trustee, HSU* (VU)
- Karen McKenna, *Secretary* (KMck)

1. Apologies for absence

Leena Patel

Non-Attendance

None

Welcome

DB welcomed all Trustees to the meeting with a particular welcome to the new incoming Sabbatical Officer team and to the new incoming Student Trustees.

Matters Arising

DB noted that in respect of the timings of Board Meetings, the current timing (ie 4.00 pm to 6.00pm) remains the preferred option amongst Trustees.

2. Declarations of Interest

None.

3. Minutes of the last meeting

The Board of Trustees approved the minutes of the last meeting held on Wednesday, 5th May 2021 at 4.00 pm.

4. CEO Update – Year in Review (Paper 1)

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

- Notable successes. She highlighted the significant achievements across the year:
 - Considerable student feedback has been collected which has led into a reshaping of how the Sabbatical Officers are supported in driving the student voice.
 - Major progress with student groups given that mostly all activity has been virtual. Investment has been made in digital capacities to support this.
- Looking forward. She drew the Board's attention to:
 - Blended learning. HSU will work to continue to support students as blended learning plans evolve. The importance of the development of community is critical for students given how impacted they have been in terms of confidence and isolation etc.
- The KPI dashboard. Positive progress continues against Board-level KPIs, agreed as part of the three-year Strategic Plan, with the exception of the Forum-based footfall. RH noted that there is a need to continue to consider how the KPIs centred on engagement and footfall will work next year given the reduced capacity of the Forum and depending upon how the facility will be reintroduced to students. She said, however, that overall HSU finds itself in a good position for the coming year.

DB thanked RH for the review and agreed that it had been a remarkably successful year given the exceptional circumstances.

5. Sabbatical Officer Year in Review

The Board received the Sabbatical Officer report which reviewed their year in office, highlighting successes and achievements, areas for improvements and advice to the incoming Officer team.

DB thanked the team for their excellent presentation and their humility in recognising there were some areas that could have been improved. He asked KM to make the presentation available to the incoming Officer team.

SP congratulated the team on their performance this year in exceptional circumstances.

DB accepted a question from KMo, whereby she asked the team how they had made sure the projects and relationships would be maintained for the future. KM replied that the handover to the new team, including them in current meetings and introductions to UH teams for example, would ensure continuity.

RH noted that HSU is undergoing the Quality Students' Unions assessment by NUS which involves

interviews with key stakeholders. She reported that assessors had met with Sabbatical Officers recently and given hugely positive feedback, noting what a credit the team are to UH and HSU. MW concurred and offered her sincere thanks to the team for their exceptional performance this year. She noted that the Officers had raised critical and challenging issues but in an atmosphere of trust and honesty where UH and HSU have been able to work together effectively for resolution. She also said that the clarity that exists around current priorities, allied to the establishment and development of new working relationships by the incoming Officer team, will make for a smooth handover of responsibilities. MW thanked the outgoing officer team once again and said how much she had enjoyed her year working with them.

6. University Update

MW updated the Board as follows:

- Challenges for the new academic year:
 - Government have advised that further guidance for the new term will be issued in September which is some six months behind UH's usual planning timetable. UH are now working through implications for business continuity given the significant upcoming changes in legislation and changes in individual expectation surrounding the new start of term. Restrictions on face-to-face teaching and learning are likely to be completely lifted in the autumn with room capacities relaxed where possible. MW therefore confidentially shared the provisional approach that UH are taking: complete the timetable build but give timetablers the flexibility to allow increased capacity in a room; allocate students to the timetabled activities; allow Schools to identify specific activities where merging and reallocating will have specific business benefits (eg don't need to recruit another lecturer), if these can be accommodated in the time remaining; and concentrate more wholesale changes on Semester B, if required. There is both a Staff and a Student Q&A scheduled.
 - MW also noted that the sector is split on its provision for the autumn with some universities planning for a return to a pre-pandemic campus environment and others very much planning for a reduced capacity timetable or in the case of Manchester University for example, the permanent removal of lectures.
 - MW highlighted that UH's philosophy was to commit to and communicate the arrangements for blended, flexible learning when they are approved, no matter the complexity of the situation. She noted that some of the changes introduced over the last year have in fact been better for staff and for teaching and learning practice. However, she accepted that large-group teaching should be brought back where both pedagogically appropriate and desirable for the student experience.
- Spring and Summer at Herts events calendar. MW noted that this had been a huge success.
- Induction. A completely revised approach to induction, welcome and orientation activities is being introduced for the new academic year, recognising that there is a need for more co-ordination, organisation and flexibility about welcoming students onto campus.
- Year 13s and 'lost' learning. A small event was held recently to understand the experiences of Year 13s and this record has now been captured and managed by the Education and Student Experience Committee to plan and prepare for Year 13s arriving at UH. MW said she is keen to move away from the language of 'lost' learning as this does not do justice to the work that colleagues in FE and schools have done in helping students to prepare for university. She did, however, note that UH will be welcoming a group of students with a quite different set of experiences and concerns than in previous years. The personal tutoring framework will be crucial in supporting these students. DB said he has also been working with a group of Year 13s and concurred that the students are very mixed in their

feelings about starting university. He suggested that he and MW could speak offline.

- Stand Alone Pledge. This is a commitment to provide additional support for estranged students. UH will be providing the same bursary for estranged students as for care leavers from this September and a fundraising campaign is being run through the University of Hertfordshire Charitable Trust.

RH said that she felt that universities like UH have been missing from the national dialogue around blended, flexible learning and consideration is needed as to how best UH could position its student voice within that. She noted that blended learning has many benefits, for commuting students for example, and unless UH can represent this experience in the national debate, the discussion becomes overly dominated by others. MW said she agreed and that she would welcome a discussion on this. She said that in recent presentations to staff she has highlighted that one of the key priorities for the coming academic year must be moving the value discussion away from 'lectures' or 'no lectures'. She said she felt the perception is that online teaching is worth less than face-to-face and lectures are worth more than any other interaction but this is not true. UH must be having, influencing and driving discussions about what value means in teaching and learning. MW also noted that she has commissioned some insight work with focus groups of students about what they would like to see in teaching and learning in the next academic year.

DB thanked MW for her report.

7. May 2021 Management Accounts and Year-end, Year-end Forecast (paper 2)

RH updated the Board as follows:

- Furlough monies and the inability to run live events have left HSU in a positive financial position.
- To keep the forecast as intended, HSU have estimated the sum of £45k will be reinvested back into students and staff. This spending has been discussed at the Finance and Audit Committee and will be allocated to the Buddy Scheme, run by the Advice and Support Scheme, to improve the technology infrastructure. This year 200 students were able to take advantage of the scheme but from the next academic year, it is hoped to increase this number, enabled by the improved technology. RH offered her sincere thanks to KM and BS for identifying this as an ideal project for the funds. SF concurred, thanking them for their input into a project which will directly benefit student wellbeing.

8. Elections Review Working Group recommendations (papers 3a – 3d)

DB introduced the item. HSU's main priority is to represent the student body to UH and to advocate where necessary. To do that, Elected Officers must be as representative of the student body as possible. However, both HSU and the Returning Officer from NUS have had concerns about the demographics of candidates, particularly at the last election, although this has been a concern for several years after increasingly less diverse elections and in the face of a rapidly changing FE landscape. A Working Group was put together comprising DB as Chair, the HSU SLT team, VP Education and SCOs to reconsider HSU's approach to elections and the Officer roles. After wide-ranging discussion, incorporating advice and guidance from students, staff and other universities, a series of recommendations have been made for discussion and agreement by the Board. These will then be subject to approval by UH's Legal team to ensure compliance with equal opportunities law and if approved, these changes will be introduced for the 2022 Election. However, the Working Group will continue to meet and act in an advisory capacity for at least two years.

RH took the Board through each of the Recommendations and highlights of the subsequent discussion are:

Recommendation 1 – Elected Officer roles

- MW asked what the risks involved with the approach were around identifying profiles once individuals have been elected. RH replied that the risks exist currently as no Officer in post can be totally committed to everything within the portfolio they represent. RH suggested that the other major risk is that a majority of Officers within a team could share the same concerns about issues, neglecting other areas. However, by assigning portfolios after training in August, this will expose Officers to the variety of issues facing HSU, UH and students and thus the Working Group are optimistic that all major priorities can be covered. DB also noted that HSU are most fortunate with their strong and experienced staff team to support Officers in their individual roles.
- BJ also expressed concern that Officers may all favour the same portfolio, particularly Activities. RH did note that often what draws students to the Sabbatical roles is the visibility of the events and activities that HSU offers. BJ said that he also felt this could cause some conflict within the Officer team if there was rivalry over the fulfilment of common goals. DB replied that the planned development programme would educate candidates pre and post-Election so that the Officers that are elected are well briefed before they take up post. RH highlighted the good role modelling that has taken place in the current Officer team who have taken different perspectives on one common issue which has fostered team unity.
- BS asked how students would know who to approach in respect of concerns and issues without defined roles and job titles as currently exist. RH replied that some additional consultation on this issue is still required with further input also required on the titles for roles.
- BJ highlighted that the period running up to the Election is always a hectic and stressful time so queried how it would be possible to build the portfolios with candidates without extra stresses and workload. RH replied that this would be completed in August once the candidates had been elected.
- MA asked if HSU would produce campaign targets / an agenda as opposed to candidates standing on their own manifestos. RH replied that the proposal is to suggest the issues that students are raising, for candidates to feed back on how they would drive that forward and represent students, the rationale being how candidates can respond to student needs rather than proposing issues that may not resonate with students in the same way. Ad hoc project work often arises also and thus this recommendation allows for flexibility which has not always been possible before.

Recommendation 2 – Candidate demographics

- MW asked if there was a slightly better way of expressing representation bearing in mind the split in the student demographic is not 50/50 between international and home students. RH noted that the Working Group thought it would be too restrictive to split the roles 1:3 home to international students to better reflect the 25% international student demographic. She noted that consideration had been given to identifying students at a more granular level such as BAME home students who are underrepresented in the election process. However, advice flagged that this could affect the free and fair nature of the elections. RH said that whilst this Recommendation does not fully reflect the demographic of the university, it does reflect that the international market and the representational needs of UH's international students continue to grow and in terms of the BAME population, by ringfencing two of the roles for home students, HSU will start to attract a more representative profile. MW suggested that the Recommendation is edited to note that 'two elected roles must be home students' or 'two elected roles must be international students' as currently, she stated that she felt that the

Recommendation is too binary.

- BJ queried what would be the position if only one or two home students applied for the roles as they would be guaranteed to be elected. RH noted that this was a risk but that in previous elections there have been occasions where roles have stood uncontested.
- KM asked what the situation for EU students would be, some of whom are classed as home students, some as international students. RH said she suggested that this would be best resolved based on fees data.
- SR asked if this recommendation had been used by any other university across the sector. RH replied that the University of Bedfordshire had used a similar model to better increase their representation of women amongst the Officer team by splitting the roles between those identifying as male and those identifying as female.
- SP expressed his interest in the legal verifications and opinions. He said that his concerns centred on what would be the implications if an election were appealed and where this would leave HSU in terms of a legal challenge. DB replied that a meeting with the UH Legal is scheduled.
- SF said she felt that more discussion was needed on this Recommendation. SI agreed. He said that whilst he understood the general tenets of the Working Group's approach, he expressed some concern about the wording of this Recommendation, suggesting that the specificity should be removed completely. He said he too would like to hear the legal advice and hoped that it would offer more comfort.
- DB thanked the Board for their feedback on this Recommendation and said he understood that more work was most definitely needed here. However, he did highlight that improvements must be made to the election process as HSU are not currently in a position where it can be genuinely confirmed to UH that the voice HSU presents represents the student body. He paid tribute to the current Officer team, noting that this was in no way a criticism of performance, but noted that the breadth of representation is missing. SI asked if this concern was driven by feedback from students or from the Working Group's research. DB replied that three focus groups were run, speaking to students who did not vote or participate at all in HSU elections this year. Alongside this, work was undertaken to speak to UH staff about upcoming priorities and views on effectiveness of student representation as well as other Unions, looking at pros and cons of their models.

Recommendation 3 – Pathways to elections

- SP said it is important that students have access to understanding the opportunities that come with being an elected representative in more detail than at present. He noted that whilst he completely took on board the motivations behind the project at large, he wanted to make sure that reform is completed in the right way. RH replied that the Working Group felt that, for some of the groups that HSU are looking to target specifically, this Recommendation will be supportive of that. In concert with Recommendation 2, the Working Group recognised the need to address the home/international divide because it is quite stark. DB noted his support for this Recommendation.

Recommendation 4 – Candidate marketing

- DB noted that despite the significant promotional campaign and media activity for the last election targeted at individual groups of students, it had not achieved the engagement and aims hoped for. Word of mouth remains a key driver of engagement and whilst it would not replace media activity, it would certainly add to it. DB said both he and RH would recommend this proposal strongly.

Recommendation 5 – Campaigning

- DB noted the high level of complaints surrounding campaign tactics received in 2021 despite campaigning being limited to online. He said that HSU must remain firm on issues surrounding campaigning.
- SP said he very much supported this proposal and that he felt it was absolutely necessary.
- BJ said that his understanding was that the issue surrounding campaign tactics is one of the reasons that many home students do not want to participate in the election process. He admitted his own hesitancy to participate previously.
- KM asked what flexibility there would be in respect of the mandatory pre-standing meetings, particularly, for example, for those students on placement and whether this could be hybrid online and face to face. RH replied that there would most definitely be flexibility built into the process, the rationale being for HSU to be as inclusive as possible. KM went on to ask that if the reasoning behind the review was to increase engagement and voting numbers, how could this be achieved by limiting physical campaigning. RH said that there was no proposal to reduce the number of days students can vote only the physical campaigning element which would be replaced with digital campaigning tactics. In response to BJ, RH noted there is no proposal to bring back '24/7' telephone voting. RH went on to say that additional training and guidance would also be introduced to avoid instances where GDPR data breaches have occurred previously, whereby telephone numbers of voting students have been taken without consent. Guidance would be circulated to all students, not just candidates but if breached by a candidate, this could be pursued through the election disciplinary procedures.

Recommendation 6 – Timeframe

- DB noted consensus amongst the Board to this proposal.

DB thanked RH for taking the Board through the Recommendations. In summary, DB noted the concerns expressed by Board members particularly on Recommendations 1 and 2. He highlighted again the upcoming meeting with the UH Legal team and once this advice has been received, the Recommendations will be brought back to the Board. Given the need to have new proposals in place for the 2022 election cycle and insufficient agreement amongst Trustees to reach a conclusion today, it may prove necessary to convene a discussion with Board members over the summer or in early September.

9. Finance and Audit Committee update

DB once again thanked KM and BS for their work on the surplus spend into the Buddy Scheme.

10. AOB

DB thanked all Board members for their substantial contributions and commitment over the past year. He offered sincere thanks to the outgoing Elected Officer team and to the outgoing Student Trustees for their hard work, input and focus. On behalf of the Board, he offered best wishes to everyone for the next stage in their careers

Meeting closed at 6.00 pm.

Next Meeting: Friday, 24th September 2021 – 2.00 pm to 5.00 pm (half-day Development Day)

- Dates for academic year 2021/22:
- Wednesday, 27th October 2021 – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm
 - Wednesday, 24th November 2021 – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm
 - Wednesday, 23rd February 2022 – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm
 - Wednesday, 4th May 2022 – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm
 - Wednesday, 15th June 2022 – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm