



**University of Hertfordshire Students' Union Board of Trustees Meeting  
Thursday, 8<sup>th</sup> September 2022 on campus and via MS Teams**

**Present:**

- David Ball (DB)
- Rhiannon Ellis (RE)
- Sarah Fuell (SF)
- Ahmer Ilyas (AI)
- Umar Mohamad (UM)
- Md Sajal (MS)
- Osama Siddiqui (OS)
- Aman Tripathi (AT)
- Dr Mairi Watson (MW)

**In attendance:**

- Sean Ferrie, *Head of Operations, HSU (SFe)*
- Rebecca Hobbs, *Chief Executive Officer, HSU (RH)*
- Steve Owen, *Head of Student Services, HSU (SO)*
- Leena Patel, *Head of People and Resources, HSU (LP)*
- Karen McKenna, *Secretary, HSU (KM)*

**1. Apologies for absence**

Steve Isaacs

**Non-Attendance**

None

**Welcome**

DB welcomed all Trustees to the meeting, with a particular welcome to new Trustees.

**2. Declarations of Interest**

None noted.

**3. Minutes of the last meeting**

The Board of Trustees approved the minutes of previous meetings which were held on 15<sup>th</sup> June 2022 (regular business and closed business) and 27<sup>th</sup> July 2022 (closed business).

#### **4. CEO Update (Paper 1)**

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

- Significant work is underway between HSU and UH around the cost-of-living crisis.
- SU Buddy Scheme matching software is now live.
- Sabbatical Officer induction and training has now taken place online and has been a mix of taught sessions, one to one mentoring, webinars and an in-person event with other SUs in the Southern Region.
- The Teaching Excellence Framework Student Submission is a separate student submission used to supplement the provider submission to give more insight into students' views. HSU will be coordinating this over the next term.
- The international student experience report, coming out of a recent survey and small focus groups, centres on wellbeing, academic and social experiences. Once finalised, this will be presented throughout the university and circulated.
- Start of Term events and activities are in train but may be affected by the national 12-day mourning period if HM The Queen passes.
- Following significant student consultation, HSU has undergone a significant rebrand. SFe will present on this at today's meeting.
- HSU has achieved 'Very Good' status (up from 'Good') in the Green Impact Students' Union scheme in recognition of the significant work towards sustainability priorities over the last year. RH noted her thanks to the former Head of Operations whose work on this project has delivered the accreditation.
- In respect of Board-level KPIs, RH flagged that the NSS score and the staff engagement score are not yet achieving the targets set. The NSS is changing its question around SUs (ie it currently asks how effectively the SU represents a student's academic interests) so it will no longer be a relevant measure. HSU will look at a different way to monitor effectiveness in terms of student voice. In respect of the engagement score, there has also been some staff turnover and vacancies over summer which may have affected this.
- In addition to the twice-yearly Risk Register update, RH updated the Board on more ongoing risks, not necessarily yet at the level to be included in the Register but deemed significant enough to be reported on for consistent monitoring. She took Trustees through various ongoing mitigations to the following:
  - A shortfall of students living in Halls which has potential impact on HSU's commercial activity. The shortfall is, however, similar to last year.
  - Following an increase in student numbers, student voice mechanisms continue to be monitored to ensure that the full picture of student views is effectively included in feedback to the university.
  - The cost-of-living crisis has the potential to cause a drop in student expenditure in the Forum. This is a trend seen in other SU venues across the country. RH said that she did not feel it would be financially as positive a year as seen previously. As a result, SLT are ensuring that there is a continual review of income and costs, with a view to cutting costs as needed. RH also noted that the university is likely to see students coming to campus more often, it being cheaper to come to campus than to heat their homes.

#### **5. Sabbatical Officer Priorities 2022/23**

DB noted that traditionally the Board had received a regular report from the Sabbatical Officer team at each Board meeting about progress against priorities. He said this format is currently

under review and will be discussed later in the meeting.

The Sabbatical Officer team went on to present their manifestos and priorities for the coming year.

DB thanked the team for their presentations and said he was looking forward to seeing how progress is made on each of these issues.

## **6. University update**

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

- Recruitment. Undergraduate target for the academic year 2022/23 was 3,351 students and UH currently sits at 188 students short of this target with decisions pending on many. There has been a delay in receiving BTec results this year, particularly affecting Creative Arts students, and there are also currently some appeals underway. This is a positive position for UH who had significantly raised their tariff this year. In respect of postgraduate students, this varies across the Schools with Education and Humanities furthest away from its target. This causes UH some concern and will result in a review of courses within this faculty for next year. At international undergraduate level, recruitment was targeted at 1,140 with 1,141 students recruited. At international postgraduate level, there are 5,776 students recruited which is 600 above the target. An additional 3,300 students at this level are expected in Semester B and the deadline for the acceptance of places is early October. This is a buoyant picture for UH, in contrast to many competitors. However, it has placed pressure on the estate and as a result, two large, temporary structures have been built on campus alongside an ongoing review of teaching spaces. MW agreed with RH's earlier comment that students will be driven to campus more this academic year, not only to enjoy the exceptional teaching and learning experience, but because it will also be cheaper for them than being at home. In light of the pressure on the estate this year, MW noted that UH is measuring the timetable against pre-agreed quality measures and information will be shared as to the extent that UH can deliver against these targets.
- Shortfall in university accommodation. There has been a significant depletion in the take-up of university accommodation. The Housing Strategy Group has met to examine what might be done to address this immediately, and into Semester B, and will report soon. MW noted UH will do all they can to keep the price of accommodation down whilst considering how to reconfigure accommodation to make it more attractive eg the introduction of cheaper twin-bedded rooms.
- Start of term. Plans are well advanced.
- Teaching Excellence Framework. UH is still awaiting Government guidance on the revised TEF scheme. Once the response is submitted, if successful, awards are made at Gold, Silver and Bronze level. If unsuccessful, the university will be given a 'requires improvement' outcome which means UH will not be able to charge full fees. At the last submission, UH were awarded Gold. MW said she was uncertain on the outcome of this submission round given that the parameters have moved so significantly and also given the responsive nature of the exercise.
- Student hardship. RH is leading a report on this area. MW noted that there is nothing but support amongst the leadership of the university to support this. Despite financial pressure on UH, MW noted that the university is absolutely committed to supporting students by repurposing existing support mechanisms and through new initiatives.
- Operation 'London Bridge' ie national response plan for the death of HM The Queen. UH have their own response plan drafted, along with accompanying comms. The university is not required to close during the mourning period.

DB thanked MW for her update and for the openness in her report.

In response to OS, MW noted that if the TEF outcome is disappointing and there is a reduction in the fees tariff that can be charged at undergraduate level, undergraduates do in fact only make up less than one-third of the total student income. The university is in strong financial 'health'. In addition, the CEG are meeting to discuss strategic intention around growth of international recruitment.

AH asked about the possibility of negative impressions being formed amongst new students in respect of the temporary structures being erected on campus. MW replied that the problem arose just as timetables and recruitment numbers were being finalised. She explained that the university had examined moving some teaching back online, with almost 95% of teaching interactions now taking place fact to face this year or repurposing spaces closer to campus eg Fielder Centre, a local hotel or even to extending teaching hours til 9 pm or into Saturdays. Rather than reducing teaching quality however, the best option was thus felt to be to build the temporary structures. She noted that these buildings do have a very permanent feel to them.

SF said that it appeared to her that with an increase in the number of students, perhaps more thinking around the issue of accommodation, particularly at a time of hardship for many, might be valuable. MW replied that accommodation take-up usually tracks undergraduate students, not postgraduate as many of those students come to the university with their families. So in a sense, the decline in the take-up of accommodation is a reflection of the decline in undergraduate numbers. However, MW reported on steps to incentivise agents to bring international students into accommodation. She went on to say that UH have kept open the opportunity for students to take up accommodation later in the year, if they change their mind, with no financial disincentive as well as exploring whether the accommodation estate is 'fit for purpose' post-pandemic. In respect of recruitment, MW said that UH was 'nervous' as to whether they would underrecruit at undergraduate level given the increased tariff and thus the target for international students was raised. This extra income has allowed for investment in digital enhancement and for the university to bring forward a range of infrastructure projects.

## **7. Draft year-end Accounts**

The Board received the draft year-end Accounts.

LP reported as follows:

- In terms of income, Commercial ended the year in surplus at £71k against budget of £30k. A conservative budget was set for the year due to it being the first year of reopening post-Covid. A good first term set the trend for the year.
- Spend per head has increased for students. Expenses for the venue were slightly overspent mostly due to getting the venue ready.
- All departments have been cautious with spending. There have been some staff changes and accompanying savings through vacancies as it is proving increasingly difficult to recruit.
- A refund of £8k was received for insurance and the pension deficit was overestimated, being £17k less than expected.
- Additional spend came by way of the rebrand, unexpected agency fees for recruitment given the difficulty of finding suitable candidates and the 1% of revenue being returned to UH.
- The year ended with an actual surplus of £10,624 compared to a forecast of £10,667.

DB thanked LP for the presentation. He reminded Trustees that the final audited accounts are presented at November's meeting when the Auditor attends to present to the Board. This will be the last year of the ongoing relationship with the current Auditor as a new supplier has been chosen for the next academic year.

#### **8. HSU rebrand**

SFe explained that earlier in the year HSU were made aware that the website domain (Herts.su) had unfortunate connotations with the Soviet Union and Russia and there was thus a need to change. As a result, it was decided to overhaul the brand identity entirely. IE Designs were appointed. They ran workshops for staff and students to ascertain feedback which seemed to indicate that HSU's identity and collateral did not stand out sufficiently; HSU was not seen as a separate entity. The design company thus pulled together a proposal to resolve these issues. SFe took Trustees through the new identity and branding as displayed on the website, social media pages, events, marketing collateral, uniforms and at the Forum. He drew attention to the colour theme which is bold and impactful. He highlighted the 'brought to you by Herts SU' strapline which has already been put into use and which has the benefit of helping students to clearly understand that HSU is working for and in their interests. SFe went on to say that the feeling amongst staff is that the new identity is very positive and appealing.

DB thanked SFe for his presentation and noted that the feedback from students has been very positive. He agreed that it was of course very much a developing project but given the emphasis that is put on engagement, particularly in performance indicators, this is a proactive and successful way to move forward.

#### **9. Cost of living and students – HSU's response**

DB noted the universal impact of the cost of living and the Prime Minister's recent announcement in respect of the energy price cap. He invited RH and RE to present the HSU response.

RE set out the context, highlighting the financial pressures and hardship issues students have been facing before the recent energy price increases. RH reported on the inherent risks for students associated with this as undoubtedly student engagement, community and wellbeing will be affected. RE said the approach to date has been to work in partnership with UH to promote support already available, to explore an increase in hardship funding, as well as the establishment of a task group specifically focused around the student experience and the cost-of-living. In addition, RH went on to note that HSU are also highlighting free activities and events for students alongside providing more daytime events with more students likely to be spending their day on campus. A review of society membership fees, the commercial budget and staff benefits and wages is underway. HSU have also released additional funding from UH for the Advice and Support Centre which has seen a 'skyrocketing' in the number of consultations.

DB thanked RE and RH for the useful information. He asked Trustees for their feedback. Highlights of the subsequent discussion included:

- DB asked how much of the work that is being planned reflects the actual position and how much is preparation for what might come. RE replied that many students are already in financial hardship which can only but worsen. She said she felt there was a small window of 'opportunity' before this happens to progress things but in actuality, there is very little time before hardship hits many students.

- MW said that UH has been asked to provide feedback to the new Minister for Education in respect of the impact of the cost-of-living crisis on students and how this will affect university incomes. UH's engagement policy tracks students who fail to engage after two weeks and MW will be receiving a weekly report on student engagement which will begin to highlight how the cost-of-living crisis is feeding through into student behaviour. MW said she is concerned that the time when UH will know the true impact on students will be when they withdraw from their course due to unaffordability. She said it is vital that UH and HSU act very quickly in a proactive way, working with appropriate charities. DB noted that many charities are also stretched at this time so it is important to join up with them to maximise economies of scale and scope.
- AT asked about additional course costs. MW replied that there is transparency in respect of costs associated with books and software etc. She said she had initiated a conversation, which is ongoing, with the Library to see if budgets can be extended so that students don't have to buy study materials.
- RE highlighted the recent Southern Region SU conference encouraging a collaborative approach to this issue.
- In response to UM, RH said that the web of private student housing has expanded very much beyond Hatfield in recent years. DB asked if there was any merit in encouraging those students back to Hatfield in an attempt to reduce travel costs. RH said that in many cases, particularly amongst international students, students move to live with their families in the locale wherever that may be. She also highlighted that Hatfield is relatively expensive in relation to other areas such as Stevenage or Hemel Hempstead. She also noted UH's work with the local council to monitor private landlords and to encourage scrupulous behaviour.
- SF suggested a number of ways in which support could be offered to students including a review of library fines, community fridges supplying food that would otherwise go to waste and encouraging support from alumni. All of these initiatives are already in train. In particular, she asked if the monies saved from the NUS membership disaffiliation could be rediverted but RH replied that these monies will not be released until next academic year. In closing, SF asked RE if the dangers and difficulties of students working in the sex industry are covered with advice and support. RE replied by saying that this education will be provided as part of the upcoming Sexual Health Awareness and Guidance Week.

DB thanked Trustees for their input. He noted that this is a project with wide implications. He suggested that this item remain as a standing item on the agenda for future meetings to keep Board members appraised.

*RE, RH and MW left the meeting at 4.25 pm.*

## **10. Appointments**

### New working group – Strategy group

DB reported that the current three-year Strategic Plan is coming towards the end of its operation and a new Plan is being worked on. This responsibility sits solely with RH but DB said that he would like to broaden this to share the workload and input into thinking. RH will thus chair a working group comprising of staff members (to be appointed by RH) and two Board members to work on iterations of the Plan. UM and AI agreed to join the group, with SF to join as an occasional Observer.

*To confirm membership: RH, UM, AI, SF (occasional Observer) and two Staff members tbc.*

Signed ..... Dated .....

Officer Progress Committee

DB noted that the Officer team had earlier presented their detailed plans for the year. He said that there was a general feeling that this forum does not allow the team sufficient time for their presentation and neither does it allow sufficient time to scrutinise progress against objectives. It is therefore proposed that a sub-Committee of the Board works with the Officer team to examine and support development of priorities. RE is currently putting together a proposed strategy for this group but there are some last-minute complications which need further interrogation. SF will lead this Committee but this cannot be formalised today and will therefore be deferred until the next meeting. DB stressed that this Committee is a supportive environment, and in no way critical. He said that as the year goes by the Officer team will find that objectives will undoubtedly change and the benefits of a Progress Committee will be immense.

Deputy Chair

RE was unanimously appointed to the role.

Student Governor

This role sits on the university's Board of Governors and is traditionally the President of HSU. RE was unanimously appointed to the role.

Finance and Audit Committee

DB referred the Board to the previously circulated Terms of Reference. SF chairs this Committee with SI, RH and LP attending. Further members are usually one Sabbatical Trustee and one of either a further Sabbatical Trustee or a Student Trustee. DB reminded the Board that currently one of the Student Trustee positions remain unfilled but recruitment will be underway imminently. DB suggested the Sabbatical Trustee be appointed today and while the other Student Trustee position is left vacant until the recruitment process is complete. MS agreed to stand and was unanimously appointed.

*To confirm membership: SF, SI, RH, LP, MS, Student Trustee to be appointed in due course.*

Remuneration and Appointments Committee

DB referred the Board to the previously circulated Terms of Reference. However, he noted that the Committee's focus is more fully centred on appointments and recruitment strategy. DB chairs this Committee with RE, RH, LP attending. One Sabbatical Trustee or a Student Trustee also join the Committee. OS agreed to stand and was unanimously appointed.

*To confirm membership: DB, RE, RH, LP, OS.*

DB thanked the Board for their input. In summary, he noted that the second appointment to the Finance and Audit Committee remains outstanding (to be concluded when the Student Trustee post has been filled) and a decision regarding the Officer Progress Committee has been deferred and will be discussed at the next meeting of the Board in October.

**11. AOB**

DB said that it may be necessary to reschedule some of the Board meeting dates for 2023. This will be communicated in due course.

Meeting closed at 4.45 pm.

**Next Meeting: Wednesday, 5<sup>th</sup> October 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm (venue tbc)**

**Wednesday, 9<sup>th</sup> November – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm**  
**Wednesday, 8<sup>th</sup> February – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm**  
**Tuesday, 9<sup>th</sup> May – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm\***  
**Tuesday, 13<sup>th</sup> June – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm\***

**\* Please note date change**