



University of Hertfordshire Students' Union Board of Trustees Meeting
Wednesday, 9th April 2025 on campus and via MS Teams

Present:

Dr Charmagne Barnes (CB)
Kesar Dave (KD)
Rohit Mahadevu (RM)
Umar Mohamad (UM)
Krishna Singh (KS)
Rajiv Sudan (RS)

In attendance:

Hannah Cosgrove, *Trustee Manager, IGG* (HC)
Phillip Dowler, *Director of Advocacy and Opportunities, HSU* (PD)
Rhiannon Ellis, *Academic Experience Manager, HSU*, (RE)
Sean Ferrie, *Director of Operations, HSU* (SF)
Rebecca Hobbs, *Chief Executive Officer, HSU* (RH)
Karen McKenna, *Secretary, HSU* (KM)
Leena Patel, *Director of People and Resources, HSU* (LP)
Ben Ward, *Trustee, SUSS* (BWd)

1. Welcome

RM was in the Chair and welcomed all Trustees to the meeting.

2. Apologies for absence

Bob Walder

Non-Attendance

Ansa Ithal
Dr Lucy Atkinson

3. Declarations of Interest

None noted.

4. Minutes of the last meeting and actions arising

The Board of Trustees approved the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on Thursday, 27th February 2025.

Signed Dated

5. Presentation by Students' Union Superannuation Scheme (SUSS)

RH briefed Trustees on the Scheme's history. SUSS is a multi-employer pension scheme, closed to new entrants since 2011. Most SUs in the UK were, at some point, members of the Scheme and NUS acts as the lead employer. The value of the Scheme has fluctuated in terms of its deficit and HSU is involved in a programme of paying down its portion of the deficit in annual increments until 2037. RH highlighted that some SUs have paid off their deficit and have exited the Scheme. RS noted that, aside from staff wages, this is the most significant line item on HSU's financial statements.

Hannah Cosgrove, Trustee Manager, IGG, and Ben Ward, Trustee, SUSS, joined the meeting at 4.10 pm.

The Board received a presentation on SUSS providing a briefing on the history, Trustees and management of the Scheme, assets, liabilities and recovery plan for the deficit, and an investment update. Highlights of the presentation included:

- BWd noted that the next triennial revaluation of the Scheme is due at the end of June this year, ready for implementation in September 2026.
- Funding level progress is currently ahead of expectation, as at the June 2024 actuarial valuation, due to better market performance and eight SUs having exited the Scheme. He highlighted their exit from the Scheme under Section 75, whereby an Employer ceases to participate in SUSS, by settling their pension deficit debt. BWd noted available case studies which illustrate various scenarios here.
- Were HSU to have left the Scheme on 6th September 2024, it is estimated that the Section 75 debt that would have been payable was £1.181m. The final figure however, when a formal Section 75 debt is triggered, will depend on data, assumptions and market conditions at the time.
- BWd noted the significant financial challenges for universities currently, causing a downward pressure on Block Grants, with the simultaneous cost-of-living crisis challenging commercial performance. As a result, he encouraged HSU to supply up to date information when the questionnaire for the revaluation comes out, so that these factors can be considered in respect of the assessment of affordability.

Highlights of the subsequent discussion included:

- RS thanked HC and BWd for this most valuable presentation and suggested it would be most sensible for Trustees to consider HSU's position after the outcome of the revaluation, later in the Summer.
- RH asked if there were any discussions taking place about extending the deficit timeframe, given some of the affordability issues being seen in the sector. BWd replied that the timeframe can be expanded or even shrunk, as well as the raising or lowering of the deficit repair contributions, but that this is based on affordability and approval from the Pension Regulator. He said it was a balancing act between affordability and ensuring that the deficit is dealt with.
- RH went on to ask if there was a point at which if enough SUs exited the Scheme, this could be of concern for HSU. BWd replied that the Scheme is segregated so that when SUs exit the Scheme, there is an allowance for orphan liabilities to be assigned. He said that exit has to be 'right' and affordable for each Union and there is no detriment to those SUs that choose to remain in the Scheme.

RM thanked HC and BWd for their time and the most valuable discussion.

Signed Dated

HC and BWd left the meeting at 4.40 pm.

- RS repeated his recommendation that after the revaluation questionnaire is submitted and results and case studies reviewed, the Board should revisit the issue for next steps.
- RH noted the reassurance offered in remaining in the Scheme given the exit of other SUs.

6. University Update

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

- Governance. CB noted a proposed new, streamlined governance structure for Education and Student Success. The Vice-Chancellor relationship with the SU remains, reporting directly into Academic Board and the Board of Governors.
- New Student Senate Forum. Originated by RM, this forum located within each School, attended by Programme teams, is proposed to deal with non-academic issues that currently take up valuable time at Programme Committees. This proposal is now with the Vice-Chancellor for approval. CB congratulated RM on this initiative which is an important legacy.
- PVC Student Group. This is the new name for the PVC Advisory Group, and it is hoped this change of focus for the Group will combine discussion of issues and also best practice across the university.
- NSS. Currently in week 9, response rate is 71%, currently approx. 1% behind last year. The aim is a response rate of 80%, compared to 78% last year.
- PTES. This is currently running, closing in June.
- Q2 financial results. These were not as anticipated, and the latest forecast is currently showing an in-year deficit for the current financial year. Therefore, in order to ensure financial affordability, while prioritising key strategic investments, VCE have approved the need to build resilience by improving the surplus position by £10m in 2025-26. This will be achieved via cost savings and/or income growth. A new project, being led by Professor Mairi Watson, is called 'Resilient Futures', and includes strands of activities and in-year measures to prioritise essential spending, pausing all recruitment, pausing non-essential travel and conference attendance, limiting catering etc. RS asked if this approach would have impact on HSU. CB replied that there has been no confirmation of any HSU initiatives/projects/strands that should be paused or stopped to which RH agreed.
- Educational Gain Survey. This has now concluded, and results are going to the Board of Governors later this month. CB will update Trustees at the next meeting.
- Artificial Intelligence. This continues to raise questions and cause anxiety amongst the student population. As an example, a student raised an important question in relation to concerns around work where there is a single submission from group work, but it is suspected that one member of the group has used AI. Although there are solutions on how to mitigate such a problem immediately, more guidance is needed and to ensure that for the upcoming UPR changes session next month, such scenarios are accounted for. In addition, a draft Strategy and Governance for the use of Generative AI is being finalised. CB will share with HSU in due course, not least as RM and HSU have been very active contributors.
- Appeals. When students are making Appeals, there appears to be a backlog in terms of when outcomes are finalised, which is neither fair nor favourable. It is therefore proposed to move Appeals to the Student Case team within Academic Registry, moving this responsibility from Schools as they do not have the dedicated resource. Schools will still, of course, offer academic input.

- Observation of teaching. There are currently several different ways, some ad hoc, in which academic staff are observed in terms of their teaching. CB noted the importance of offering both assurance to the Regulator but also to the student body that the university provides excellent teaching and learning. This review is in train and with the unions for further discussion.

RM thanked CB for her most valuable and informative update.

RE joined the meeting at 5.00 pm.

7. SCOs Update

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

- SCOs currently receive a bursary payment from UH but this is causing some issues around compliance and remuneration.
- It is now proposed to move SCOs to a part-time, paid employment position. This will sit within HSU's Academic Experience team who can offer line management and additional support to ensure SCOs can carry out their roles effectively and be remunerated fairly.
- This has been approved by CB, and by the Vice-Chancellor.

CB and RE left the meeting at 5.05 pm.

8. CEO Update

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

- HSU business planning priorities for the upcoming academic year reflect both HSU's own strategic plan and UH's strategic plan. RH said she would ask CB to brief Trustees on the UH's Strategy for 2025-30 at the next Board Meeting. Each priority has been shaped by student insight and institutional direction, ensuring alignment with sector challenges and local opportunity. RH briefed Trustees on each of the priorities in detail. Underpinning all of the priorities is a continued commitment to student voice. RS said it was always important to revisit the Strategy at regular intervals.

RH

9. February Management Accounts

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

- March Accounts are not yet finalised and thus, LP shared February Accounts. These will be circulated to the Board and March Accounts will also be shared when they are ready. Going forward, it may not be possible to synch the Accounts with the appropriate Board meeting due to Board meetings taking place in alignment with CB's diary. However, the Finance, Audit and Risk Committee will receive Accounts in synch where possible.
- HSU is forecasting an end of year small surplus, mainly due to income from Enterprises and large events taking place, including Graduations. However, there are approximately eight

KM

laptops that need replacing, given the introduction of Windows 11 in October, and this will result in some expenditure which has reduced the surplus.

- There have also been salary savings in some departments. These savings will create four or five student internships, which will provide employment opportunities between May and July. Students will be placed in the HR department to work on training for student staff and leaders, Marketing for graphic design and events, and also within the Academic Experience and Insight departments.

10. 2025-26 Budget

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

- The directive for the budget for the new academic year from UH has been that any new projects will have to be funded from within the existing budget. HSU have always kept initiatives under review, so this is not a new way of working. There will be no new growth but some marginal uplift to reflect the current economic landscape.
- Review meetings with UH are now underway.

11. Elected Officer Update

The Board received a report on the activities of the Elected Officer team from KD. Highlights of the subsequent discussion included:

- UM thanked KD for the excellent update. He asked if the provision of sanitary products advocated for by both the Women and LBQT+ Students' Officers was the same initiative. KD replied that this was the case but currently, there is no further details from Estates around installation.
- RS said that he was very interested to hear about the upcoming TEDx Event and attending if possible. He wished RM and the team well with the event.

RE re-joined the meeting at 5.25 pm.

12. Elections debrief

The Board received a presentation on the Elections cycle for 2025 from RE. Highlights of the subsequent discussion included:

- RS thanked RE for the very useful presentation. He asked how it is possible to encourage more female students to vote. PD replied that the impact of trying to encourage underrepresented groups to vote is first expected at the candidate level. This change in demographic, traditionally, then trickles down once the student community can see changes to the elected body and thus it impacts their behaviour. Therefore, he was optimistic that this should result in a change in voter demographics next year.
- UM offered his thanks to RE. He highlighted an issue with the ethnicity data quality ie a high percentage of students who identified as white at 35%, but when examined against candidate numbers, there was a large disparity at only 5%. PD replied that this was a data skew that reflects the way that students self-report when they register with the university. UH are working with students to help them understand what information they are

supplying and what it is used for. During the Elections, some students have asked the university to change their data. RH acknowledged that there is a significant data issue across the university which Registry are unpicking.

- UM asked for feedback on those complaints and appeals upheld and noted in the Returning Officer's Report. PD replied that many complaints were about the same individuals and cases, and generally related to candidate conduct.
- RM said he was very pleased to see the increased participation under the new voting system which will have considerable impact, and he thanked PD, RE and the team for their hard work over the period. RH echoed these comments and offered her sincere thanks. She noted that whilst percentage turnout was not the highest in the sector, it was in the top third and she noted the significance of this.

RE left the meeting at 5.40 pm.

13. Finance, Audit and Risk Committee update

RS reported on the last meeting of the Committee which included a discussion on the Budget process. He noted the Audit Tender process, which is commencing, to include the current incumbent. The Elected Officer rotation process was also discussed and is now concluding and moving towards the appointment of more permanent Trustees. LP said that it had not been possible to take applications to the last Student Council as there were not sufficient applicants. The team have, however, reached out to the incoming Elected Officer team and LP said she was pleased to advise that there have now been applications. These will now go before the next meeting of Student Council in May.

14. AOB

Vice-Chancellor's Awards

Out of 1500 nominations from members of staff that have been submitted. RH said that 36 finalists have been shortlisted and 3 are from the HSU team: Libby Freeman, People and Development Manager, nominated for Professional Staff Member of the Year; Leena Patel, Director of People and Resources, nominated for Community Contribution of the Year for her outstanding work on bringing together HR functions from SUs in the Southern region; and to Phill Dowler and the Insight Team for Team of the Year for the Herts Unfiltered project. The Board offered their congratulations to the finalists.

Harassment issues

RS asked for an update on the harassment issues at the venues, as reported at the last meeting of the Board. SF replied that since that report, there have been only a couple of minor incidents as the overall number of issues have lessened. This continues to be hugely important to monitor.

Kesar Dave

KD has completed her term of office. RM thanked KD wholeheartedly for her service this year and hard work.

HSU Staff Newsletter

The Board received the HSU Staff Newsletter for information.

Close

RH thanked RM for his excellent chairing of today's meeting.

Meeting closed at 6.00 pm.

Next Meeting: Thursday, 29th May 2025

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

Thursday, 26th June 2025