



**University of Hertfordshire Students' Union Board of Trustees Meeting
Wednesday, 9th November 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)
- Aman Tripathi (AT)
- Dr Mairi Watson (MW)

In attendance:

- 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)
- Alex Bottom, *Partner, Hillier Hopkins LLP* (AB)

1. Apologies for absence

- Sean Ferrie
- Steve Isaacs
- Osama Siddiqui

Non-Attendance

None

2. Declarations of Interest

None noted.

3. Minutes of the last meeting

The Board of Trustees approved the minutes of the previous meeting, which was held on Wednesday, 5th October 2022.

In respect of the last meeting, DB noted that there had been no queries raised to the Sabbatical Officer team reports presented.

DB also noted that in respect of the Officer Accountability project, refinement of the proposal is ongoing. Once the final output is confirmed, it will be shared with Trustees.

Signed Dated

4. CEO Update

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

- October saw a 1.29% increase in the number of students accessing the Advice service compared to that in October, with a 21.76% increase from the previous month. The team also supported 9 outreach activities (both school-specific and welfare related). Academic appeal advice is the most common type of advice provided to students currently. The service is also reporting that students are attending with more complex issues, which are multi-layered, with financial and mental wellbeing issues prevalent alongside academic advice sought. The SU Buddy Scheme has been launched and is going very well.
- The Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF) Student Submission is currently being compiled.
- HSU has been working with UH colleagues to disseminate student feedback on the start of term. Key feedback points have been around bus overcrowding and the Registration process for international students.
- There has been a drop in attendance in the Forum across the term to date. To respond to this, the team have trialled several different marketing approaches which are helping but it is expected that October's accounts will show a slightly negative variance.
- NUS have recently announced the outcome of one part of their two-part investigation into antisemitism. Following a disciplinary panel, NUS have decided to remove their incoming President on the basis of alleged antisemitic behaviour. The second half of their investigation, which covers allegations of antisemitism more widely within NUS, is due to report at the end of November.
- The Freedom of Speech Bill is currently being discussed in the House of Lords. The final bill could result in enhanced scrutiny and liability for students' unions and any guest speakers or events hosted either directly or via affiliated student groups. HSU have been working with UH's legal team to ensure a cohesive approach.

5. Year-end Accounts and Audit Report

DB welcomed Alex Bottom of Hillier Hopkins to the meeting and thanked him for joining the Board today to take them through the Trustees' Report and Financial Statements.

AB began by noting he would talk to the Director's Report and Financial Statements for UHSU Enterprises Ltd. He highlighted the following:

- The Audit Opinion gives a considered judgement as to whether the Financial Statements give a true and fair view of the subsidiary's financial affairs. This is signed off by AB as the senior statutory auditor of Hillier Hopkins.
- Turnover has risen from £36,359 for the year ended 31st July 2021 to £775,453 for the year ended 31st July 2022. Cost of sales from £101,664 to £526,653, and Administrative expenses from £65,305 to £248,799. This is as a result of activity being dormant for most of 2021 due to the pandemic.
- There is a tax charge of £1,973 due to the tax treatment of the stamp duty on the lease signed with UH.
- The net liabilities position is back to breakeven.

AB moved on to talk to the Trustees' Report and Financial Statement which bring together both HSU activities and the trading subsidiary activities. He highlighted the following:

Signed Dated

- The Trustees' Report explores the operations of HSU and its impact, along with intentions for the future and how the organisation has responded to the issues of the day. This is signed off by the Chair, on behalf of the Board.
- The Audit Opinion gives a considered judgement as to whether the Financial Statements give a true and fair view of the charity and its subsidiary's financial affairs.
- In respect of the Management Letter, AB noted that there was nothing substantial to report on. The Audit did show that for one employee, that proof of ID was not on file. However, this was not a systemic issue and thus did not merit reporting formally.
- For the year ended 31st July 2022, HSU's gross income from all sources was £2,556,839. The University Block Group has stayed the same year on year. However, the University grant for rent was different year on year due to the dormant trading period in 2021. Other income equates to the furlough income, hence none is noted for 2022.
- Charitable activities income is considerably up on last year now that trading activity has fully returned from the Covid-19 closures.
- Net position is showing a small surplus.
- The closed defined benefit pension scheme continues to be in significant deficit. There is a deficit reduction scheme in place to ensure this liability is fully met by 2035. There has been a small gain for the year, against a substantial loss in 2021. AB noted that the scheme liability of £1,317,803 should drop if there is an increase in interest rates, which is likely. This causes an overall negative net asset position.
- Free reserves are £345,055 at the year-end which is well within HSU's Reserves Policy, so will see HSU in good financial stead heading into next year.

DB noted that the UH Finance and Audit Committee are very cognisant of the pension deficit.

DB thanked AB for the comprehensive and thorough review and for giving his time to join today's meeting. He went on to say that the contract for the provision of Audit Services between Hillier Hopkins LLP and HSU was coming to an end this year. He said that, on behalf of the entire Board, he would like to offer his thanks for the tremendous support that AB and his team have offered HSU over the years.

AB left the meeting at 4.45 pm.

DB reminded the Board of the previous debate that had taken place as to whether to renew the contract with Hillier Hopkins. A different provider will be supplying services next year.

RH said that the Audit team had fed back that it had been a very smooth audit. She thanked the Head of Finance and her team for the extremely productive and positive process. DB seconded RH's thanks, not only for this exercise but also for their management of the change of contract.

6. September Management Accounts

The Board received the Management Accounts for September. LP highlighted the following:

- Commercial ended September with a surplus of £43,957 against budget of £21,666. This is due to additional private hire events (ie wedding, bar mitzvah) in the venue and the SU external agreements coming in higher than expected.
- More wristbands and tickets were sold but this did not materialise in increased attendance, which affected wet sales.

Signed Dated

- Some technical issues with tills had an impact. Although this is now resolved, it affected cloakroom income.
- Several fire alarms also occurred. The necessary evacuations caused students not to re-enter the venue, which reduced bar spend on these occasions. RH said that there appears to be a technical fault with the alarm system which is beginning to have a commercial impact. Furthermore, there are Health and Safety concerns as these false alarms are encouraging students not to take the evacuations seriously. This will be discussed with UH at the upcoming joint Campus Services Group.
- All departments spent very cautiously. All overspends were authorised and should even out by the end of the year.
- Some salary savings have been made with a number of vacancies. Recruitment is still an issue.
- Overall, an overall deficit of £28,968 had been budgeted for, but the month ended in a positive of £28,253 due to cautious departmental spending and the additional income from commercial activity.

7. Sabbatical Officer report

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

- RE noted that, since publication of her report, the issues around period poverty have been discussed with UH who have agreed to the implementation of sustainable free sanitary products on campus. SF congratulated RE on this work.
- In response to SF, MS said that approximately 40% of societies are inactive. Some of the societies have had no committee members and have been closed down. Some societies, particularly Academic, do receive funds from their respective Schools which keeps membership fees low. In response to AI, MS said he is doing all he can to support societies by making himself available and to encourage students to proactively discuss with him ways of growing the groups.
- UM thanked the team for the very useful and comprehensive report. He went on to ask what the reasons were for the increase in the number of students seeking Academic appeal advice. AT replied that with a large international student cohort, whose first language isn't always English, issues inevitably surrounding citation, referencing and plagiarism arise. DB noted that sometimes students fall foul of the Academic regulations without even realising it. In respect of Academic support, MW went on to note that a major piece of work was carried out last year to review this. Recommendations are currently being taken to the Deans and onwards to the CEG and will require some investment in resources. MW also said that the number of Academic misconduct cases were likely increased last year due to the rapid change of assessment modes as a result of the pandemic. This inevitably left students unsure as to how to perform well. In order to ensure this does not happen again, MW said that UH is committing to not returning to exams so that students' skills can continue to build around more authentic assessment. There have also been changes made to the Extenuating Circumstances policy, which puts a much better focus on support for students before they ask for help.
- AI congratulated the Officer team on their work and their collective activism.
- DB asked that any further questions in respect of OS's report, or on the report in general, be passed to him and he will revert at the next meeting.

8. Cost-of-living update

The Board received an update from RE, on behalf of the Officer team, on feedback from students in respect of the cost-of-living crisis. She noted the somewhat small sample size but said that, nevertheless, it was a good interim update. Highlights of the presentation and discussion included:

- 80% of students said they were concerned about their own personal cost-of-living.
- The biggest area of concern for all students was around accommodation costs but Home students noted that concerns about food costs concerned them the most, with International students prioritising concern around accommodation costs.
- Many students reported they were going hungry or reducing their intake to cope with increasing food prices.
- Some students are skipping classes and extra-curricular clubs in order to limit travel costs and hence, the number of times they have to travel to campus.
- Many students expressed concerns about their mental wellbeing.
- DB said that he felt this was a very important piece of work to give a feel as to where the 'pinch-points' are. He asked for more details on the issue of concern around accommodation for International students. RE replied that many International students are now bringing dependents, who clearly cannot live on campus. Many of these families are having to move out of Hatfield to a cheaper area which inevitably incurs increased travel costs.
- UM also thanked the team for the report. He asked what controls were in place to prevent any potentially fraudulent claims to the hardship funds. RE replied that the University Financial Assistance Fund (UFAF) and the Overseas Emergency Financial Aid (OEFA) have stringent procedures in place, asking students to provide evidence as to their financial position. In respect of the Short-Term Assistance Grant (STAG), which offers more immediate assistance, RE said that the fund has a much smaller pot of money to allocate and as such, requires much briefer evidence. She said that there was an element of risk that this fund could be used fraudulently but the point is to offer quick access. MW noted that students are only able to claim once from the STAG and this would go some way to minimising any risk. RH said that because the amounts awarded are small, it is estimated that around 300 students in total will benefit.
- SF said she was concerned that this perilous financial environment will continue to exist for some considerable time. She asked if there were any other areas where the system could be 'squeezed' further, such as offering a free meal to children or reduced photocopying charges as examples, to benefit students. RE replied that there are indeed many other areas that could be considered but it is important to put energy behind ideas that can have an impact.

9. University update

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

- Cost-of-living crisis. MW said that UH will continue to monitor the size of the hardship fund as the year goes on, particularly given the impact on students of no increase in the size of the student maintenance grant since it was introduced.
- UCU strike. The University and College Union (UCU) reached agreement to take industrial action, over pay and working conditions such that staff across the higher education sector have voted in favour of strike action on Thursday, 24th, Friday, 25th and Wednesday, 30th November. They have also informed UH that they will be taking part in continuous action short of strike (ASOS) from Wednesday, 23rd November. Action short of strike will consist

of members only working to contract. UH is advising students that UH will remain open during the strike action and learning and teaching will go ahead wherever possible. UH is putting in place a series of measures to limit the impact on students.

- The National Student Survey (NSS) 2023. Changes to the survey for next year have now been confirmed. The overall satisfaction question will be removed for England (to remain in Scotland and Wales, with different regulatory frameworks). The scale of responses is changing from a 5-point scale to a 4-point scale. MW said she thought these would be positive changes for UH and she was currently working on communicating these changes to staff and students. She said, however, that she felt that the questions were somewhat 'academic' using terms that are not in everyday conversation at UH. From Semester B, the Student Voice questions at the end of modules will feature these types of questions to ensure that students are used to answering similar. Analysis and data outcomes, and how the NSS will be used in league tables, is yet to be confirmed.
- Teaching Excellent Framework (TEF) submission. UH is in a good place in getting to grips with the data and planning the report. Data appears to confirm that UH is likely to be awarded Silver towards Gold. TEF assessors will be confirmed this week.

DB thanked MW for bringing the university perspective to the Board.

SF asked how the temporary accommodation was faring. MW said that there had been mixed reviews. Many Schools are very grateful for the space. Some others are unhappy with the noise environment in the structure. There is a significant amount of work underway to look at the Estates Plan for next year which will examine repurposing office space to teaching space to offer more permanent options. This is particularly important as the university is planning to grow between 3-5% next year, dependent on Government policy and the external context of course, while remaining flexible to shrink if needs be.

10. Remuneration and Appointments Committee update

DB updated that a number of External Trustees retire over the next calendar year. Recruitment for the Chair will commence as the first part of this process. Once the Chair is appointed, he/she will be involved in the recruitment of the other two External Trustees who retire in September 2023 and January 2024.

DB also reported that he and RE had recently undertaken a round of interviews for the vacant Student Trustee role but this has not resulted in a successful appointment. The regulations allow for an individual to be co-opted to this role and this is being explored. If this approach does result in a successful appointment, DB will notify the Board as appropriate. DB also stressed the importance of this position to the Board composition, as the structure should favour a 6 to 5 student to non-student ratio to ensure student representation. SF asked if it was possible to reduce the number of External Trustees. RH replied that this would be somewhat 'short-sighted' as the Student Trustee roles only run for one year, while External Trustees are in post for three years, which can be renewed for a further three years, making six years in total.

11. Risk Register

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

- Guest Speakers. HSU Guest Speaker and UH Freedom of Speech policies are in place and regularly monitored in collaboration with UH. To date, HSU have never declined a guest

speaker, except for logistical issues but this is rare.

- NUS affiliation. Some other Student Unions are reporting disquiet from their students about what has gone before in the operation of the organisation or in respect of issues around the ex-President. RH noted that no feedback of this kind has been reported from UH students. She said it will remain on the Risk Register until such time as the disaffiliation is complete. DB said that much of the disaffiliation discussion for HSU had been ongoing for approximately two years but was brought to a head by the issues around antisemitism. Disaffiliation was overwhelmingly supported. RH noted that the Federation of Islamic Societies have written to Islamic Societies asking them to consider lobbying their Unions to disaffiliate from NUS for what they consider to be unfair treatment of the President, who is a young Muslim woman. This issue has the potential to be extremely difficult in terms of cultural relations on campus. RH and DB both agreed that it would be more beneficial to allow NUS to resolve their issues before reconsidering any reaffiliation by HSU in the future, as reaffiliation might have the potential to create conflict where currently there is none. In response to SF, RH said that disaffiliation will occur from the end of this year and will incur a saving of approximately £23k for next year. SF asked if these monies could be further added to a student hardship fund. RH said the sum is substantial and would certainly be reallocated. DB suggested this is discussed at a future meeting of the Finance and Audit Committee.
- RH noted that a copy of HSU's Risk Register is presented to UH's Audit and Risk Committee annually.
- UM asked when the last time any business continuity testing had been completed. RH said that most of the IT systems are run through UH IT services and HSU therefore dovetail into UH's own Risk Register for business continuity. She said she would extract the relevant section from the UH Risk Register that speak to that and forward on to UM.
- UM further asked if HSU was comfortable with the Residual Risk Score, within its own risk appetite, or if this in fact reflects where the current controls leave the organisation. RH said that it was a mixture of the former and latter. The Score reflects mitigations taken by the HSU to reduce risk. However, she said there had not been a formal conversation as to whether this sat with the Board's appetite to risk and there was further work to do here. RH suggested that she and UM speak offline to progress this.

RH

RH/UM

12. AOB

None noted.

Meeting closed at 6.00 pm.

Next Meeting: Wednesday, 8th February - 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm (venue tbc)

Tuesday, 9th May – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm

Tuesday, 13th June – 4.00 pm to 6.00 pm