

**Trustee Board Summary Minutes**

**Held on 26th January 2023 in Room BD-07-004, Belfast**

**Present: In Attendance:**

Grace Boyle, President (Chair) David Longstaff, Chief Executive Officer

Rebecca Allen, Vice President, Education Colin Campbell, Director of HR & Campus Operations

Robert Millar, Vice President Belfast Clodagh Kennedy, Director of Finance & Business

Ethan Davies, Vice President Coleraine Support

Ashley Neill, Lay Trustee Gavin Boyd, Director of Membership & Comms

Aaron Ward, Lay Trustee Dónall Hegarty, Vice President Magee

Andrea Probets Lay Trustee Chaudhary Hamza Riaz, Vice President Equality &

Antoinette Bradley, Lay Trustee Belonging

Eoin Millar, Student Trustee Finola Quigg, Vice President Sports & Wellbeing Jackie Taggart, Note Taker

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| **Meeting Notes** | **Action** | **Update** |
| **Agenda Item 1:** Welcome by Chair:  The Chair welcomed everyone to the meeting |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 2:** Apologies**:** DF and SH. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 3:** Declaration of Interest:  The Chair noted that there were no declarations. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 4:** Minutes  Minutes of the previous meeting of 24th November 2022 were approved. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 5:** Matters Arising:  Agenda Item 14: Mental Health Action Plan: (deferred from 24 11 22 meeting)  The Chair advised that this is a comprehensive action plan which is in its final stages and will be presented at the next Trustee Board meeting. She thanked the VPS&W and SSDO Coleraine for their work on this.  Agenda Item 19: Any Other Business:  The DM&C noted that NICVA offer governance training for new Trustees and he will consider this when planning the summer training. | Mental Health Action Plan to be presented at next Board meeting. |  |
| **Agenda Item 6:** Chair’s Communications:  Health Sciences School transition: A communication was issued in December to students from the Health Sciences Transition Support Team that they would receive a payment this semester following a statement in July on a support scheme. A travel bursary was included where we were able to secure additional funding for students, through a tweak in the distances that they were impacted by. Students who were disadvantaged at the point of application with unforeseen extra costs, i.e., childcare, could also apply for a supplementary payment of up to £800. UUSU issued a statement on the work carried out by UUSU Reps highlighting the importance of engagement. She thanked everyone involved in this big win, particularly the School and Transition Reps.  The Chair, VPE and VPM are working on student cost of living issues. Wins are:   * Several student kitchenettes will soon be completed in the Belfast Campus, including one in the UUSU space. * Free breakfasts twice a week are ongoing for this semester, subject to confirmation by Campus Life. * Free Graduations have also been confirmed and we are pushing for free summer Graduations. * The Government has been asked for cost-of-living payments for students and we would welcome support from the University on this. * Many students have been unable to avail of the fuel payments as it is at the Landlord’s discretion to distribute it. The Chair and VPE have advised Senior Leadership on this and have devised a template letter for members to use to press the matter. * The VPS&W had submitted a paper to the PVC on academic quality and student experience and in support of students’ sports membership fees to be free, with any retrospective payments from last year being paid in September/October. It may cover next year’s academic intake also. The paper is currently under review. * The Mental Health Action Plan will cover U Belong to tackle loneliness which the VPS&W is supporting. Events have been planned and details are on the website with a chance for students to submit campaign ideas and claim up to £500 to support mental health and wellbeing. * Tuition fees are due to rise next academic year to1.8% for undergraduate students, 4.9% for postgraduates and 7.9% for international students. We have reiterated our policy that free education is a right. Postgraduates can claim up to £5,500 worth of funding, but adults studying part-time will be forced to pay £1,000 more, depending on their course, to avail of flexible education at Ulster. The VPE&B has been working with the International Department and has raised the issue of international students having to pay 25% of their fees in advance which is rising to 50%. Work is ongoing on this. Belfast has a significant number of overseas students, and we will have to investigate and campaign on this. * Strike Action is imminent with UCU striking eighteen days during February and March about pay, pension reform and working conditions for University staff. UNITE will also strike one day in February about their pay. This is unsettling for students, and it is necessary for us to campaign to minimalize the impact of lost learning. A Task & Finish Group has been set up for mitigation for students and will present to University Senate. The University is looking at points of assessment for final years, but this is based on students having passed the first semester which means that some have not been marked, and the VPE will have more information on that point once any proposed mitigations become clearer.   She ended her report by thanking UUSU staff and the Officer Team for their work at this challenging time for UUSU. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 7:** Chief Executive Officer’s Report:  The CEO expanded on the points made by the President on the upcoming strike actions and feedback that there was a third meeting yesterday between the joint trade unions and UCEA which was brought forward to find a resolution to the matter. UCEA has offered 5-8% staggered over this and next year which was turned down by the Trade Unions who want inflation +2% so there is little likelihood of them reaching an agreement at this time. Many institutions under UCEA’s umbrella won’t be able to absorb such a figure, therefore the eighteen days of strikes will probably proceed. More concerning is the re-balloting of UCU members who will be looking for a marking and assessment boycott which will be detrimental to students and will impact on the ability for final years to graduate. The Chair, VPE and Officers are lobbying the University for mitigation here and this is our focus to support members.  Prior to Christmas, the University indicated that they are keen to invest into our spaces across the campuses, initially in Belfast, but also Coleraine which is long overdue. The Belfast bar space is not really designed for late-night events, and we have now secured a potential solution on this which can be developed over the coming months.  Great work has gone into cost of living with significant wins that Officers achieved for the student body. There were no cash payments, rather investment put into services that students can avail of through the coming months. Officers and the CEO will continue to lobby the University and politicians when the opportunity arises for further support. Recent research by Sutton Trustidentified 25% of students are at risk of dropping out of University altogether, 33% have skipped meals to save money, and 66% are spending less on food as a result of the cost of living. This shows a definite gap in terms of giving our members the tools to live and survive. The Chair had mentioned provision of two breakfasts per week but this leaves three days, so we are putting in a bid shortly to a fund which has re-focused on cost-of-living interventions and if successful it will mean that we can keep kitchenettes stocked with free tea, coffee, cereals etc. This will be a huge help to the student community. We are also trying to identify other areas outside the University’s scope.  Staff meeting dates have been planned over the next three years. We were delighted to see Board members at the December meeting and if you can attend any future meetings, let the Secretariat know and she will include you in the details.  The Board raised the question of signposting students to foodbanks and the CEO advised that the Advice Bureau handles this. The University has started donating unused food to foodbanks and it is alarming that so many students are using them. The Board inquired as to the possibility of sponsorship by Hotels and businesses which is a huge opportunity worth targeting. The CEO agreed and felt that an external venue from which to operate could be interesting as a notion if contractual obligations meant that nothing in-house could be achieved. | The Chair to circulate a report on students accessing foodbanks. |  |
| **Agenda Item 8:** Management Accounts:  The DF&BS presented the accounts for five months to 31st December 2022. She advised that there were no issues of concern and gave a summary:  The block grant is phased in over the year under Income and it has increased by 5.3% on last year.  Expenditure is under budget for this year as Salaries and Wages has positions that were not yet successfully recruited. The Board requested information on recruitment issues with concern as to the impact on delivery. The CEO replied that the HR and Business Development roles will be discussed at Senior Management Team meeting on Monday to work out a timeline for recruitment. Neither of the roles impact on projects, but there are issues that have been paused, particularly with the HR post. He reminded that this role was advertised twice for Coleraine, but this might need to change due to the lack of interest in the role as it is currently advertised.    The Sports Union is spending a lot this year and there is a concern that it will have to use sponsorship money to alleviate this. Their transport cost is high and Intervarsities start in February. The Sports Union Management Committee is conscious of the spend, and that the budget is ring-fenced. Membership is overspent but money is expected from the University to cover start of year events where confusion arose as to who was responsible for payment.  NUS Affiliation Fees are smaller this year.  Legal and Consultancy is high, with the reason being covered previously.  The Budget Sheet highlights that Reserves are where these should be for a charity of our size, so we are in a good financial position.  The financial year runs from 1st August to 31st July, and therefore the next six-monthly accounts will be presented to the Board at the next meeting. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 9:** Central Risk Register:  The CEO reported that, depending on a further action, the Central Risk Register will still exist but will be visited on an annual basis as risk will be reported slightly differently as part of the CEO report.  The transition to Belfast has been successful. Staff have dealt with adjustments very well and found ways to overcome difficulties. He felt it is a good time to de-escalate the risk but keep it until twelve months have lapsed and we have had our review meeting with the University.  He advised that he will be providing a narrative on risks that are becoming more serious that the Board needs to be aware of. The full Register will be retained by Senior Management Team.  The Board agreed that it would be glad to receive the information via this means. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 10:** Operating Plan Progress Update:  The CEO advised this will be presented in more detail as per the half year mark. Previous ongoing targets for delivery will be segmented in the report under various headings so that the Board can note progress.  Trustee Induction Packs: These are finalised but currently undergoing a more appealing design. They will be available for new Trustees and are also online.  Annual Trustee Board Evaluation: This was put in place in July and will continue to be delivered externally once every three years. Quotes will be sought when an external review is required.  Campaigns and PR: Officers have driven campaigns and shifted focus on a smaller number of key issues that are impacting on students, i.e. Mental health and cost of living rather than a larger amount of campaigns.  Press profile is ongoing and over the past three years we have developed the ability to choose our media spots and turn down those with more contentious issues. We are focusing on much higher profile ones with The View as the highest so far. We need to ascertain if it should be more of a qualitative or quantitative approach.  Campus Operations: The move to Belfast is completed, but a form of investment strategy needs to be put in place to prevent having to lobby continually for investment for our spaces on each campus so that it is continual. We will have the proposal and the narrative in train for this.  Commercial Services – The last three years were tough, although the decision was correct in terms of staying solvent. The processes of closure and decampment of equipment are complete. Profit sharing has not come to fruition for a variety of reasons, and currently not in our interests to pursue this.  Comms: The DM&C is on board and comms will become a key factor in our future strategy. We might need to become braver to align with our students and keep our membership in the loop. Officers are working behind the scenes to get a positive solution as to our biggest benefit.  Community – This is difficult to navigate after Covid, and we need a clearer plan around activities. We restructured the Student Activities Coordinator roles and have recruited a Volunteering & Events Coordinator in place of the vacant Student Activities Coordinator for Coleraine and Magee. He has performed some good work this year in providing opportunities for volunteering which gets us into that network again.  Benefits: NUS offer benefits for students but not all are relevant here in NI. We would like to do more work with local businesses and bring them on board, so Ulster students have a bespoke set of benefits. Work has been done but it will have to be managed and this will be a key priority for the Business Development Role.  Engagement: We continue to get the vast majority of roles filled in representative structure but would like to see the forgotten 80% join in who don’t want to engage.  Overall election turn-out: Covid saw a drop as it was online. Strikes may impact this year. We expect to see an increase but not until we can have elections without external pressures.  Advice: The AM has advised that they have had an incredibly busy year. Information on engagement can be compiled, but it is time consuming to get the paperwork together.  Fiscal Position: This has grown out of Covid and is good. Reserves have grown as per our aspiration around this, and the block grant has increased by 5.3%. The Business Development Role will help develop this in other avenues.  Induction Process for Staff: This is ongoing and was sampled by recent recruits. The HR post will drive it by covering all parts and ensuring it is complete and formalised and that the new recruit will have a mentor for the first two to three weeks.  Marketing: The website tender has been successful, and money has been invested for a Spring launch bringing friendly, easy access and useful information. This will be a unique task for the Business Development role to monitor growth in marketing and comms at the end of the year which will be benchmarked against the previous year.  Representation: Student Council has been reformed slightly to ensure all voices can make themselves heard. There is a diverse body of students who celebrate equality and belonging for all, and equality seats across the campuses. We are ticking boxes to ensure that every student has a spokesperson to champion their views. Officer roles were reviewed with the VPE&B enhancement to a good range of responsibilities across the team. 80% of leadership posts, all our Student Officer posts, and most representative posts are full.  Strategic Development: We have appointed a DM&C who has an enhanced team.  Business & Continuity Plan: This has been signed off by the Board.  New Strategy Consultation Process: This is currently ongoing. Papers are currently being gathered for the Quality Students’ Union Award run by NUS. It has two parts, with the first being accreditation and the second being a peer assessed, higher standard of accreditation which will last for six months. This will be a mark of achievement and the timing is key.  Alumni Engagement Plan: The Chair and the CEO will revisit this. The Alumni Database needs to be mentored for financial gain to the organisation and perhaps the Business Development role will drive it. The framework and access will be discussed and put in place by the end of the cycle.  In terms of the overall three years of this strategy cycle, we have developed twenty-eight of the defined areas with three having been paused and two which are no longer realistic having been retired. The majority of this plan should be delivered by July.  The Board raised a query about the roles of NUS and USI in Northern Ireland and the CEO explained that there are many core elements we get for being affiliated with NUS, which provided a collective voice. There remain some issues in terms of the context here and most notably NUS has now lost that voice with the Government, who are currently not engaging with them.  Other benefits of NUS would be:   * We have a network with other Students’ Unions through them which provide a workplace platform where staff, Trustees or student reps can raise queries and get responses from other Students’ Unions that are affiliated with NUS. * NUS has a critical buy-in mass which is of benefit to students through a good level of discount.      * NUS and USI provide quality training.   The Board agreed that this is important to students, particularly on the cost of living, and a voice in the University on policy is very important and proves that we have listened to students.  The Board noted that UUSU is recruiting a student Tik Tok Host, and it is good to see what UUSU is doing for students. The Chair explained that during Covid, elections were online. Campaigning is now both in person and online. The Board agreed that UUSU can find candidates, but those candidates must also look for students to engage with. There is a middle gap where students become apathetic or get lost, although the balance is improving. The CEO informed that the DM&C had identified approaching students on the ground (rather than digitally) and informing them what we offer and how we are supporting them as a way forward.  The Board felt that the traditional method of face-to-face approaches returning was good as sometimes comms by social media needs maintaining offline. It was pleased to have an update on the space’s investment. Student Officers need to avoid the temptation of a conversation on business as striking a balance is important. The Board offered its external expertise and the CEO expressed appreciation and added that this will become a compressed report in the future which will be easier to navigate and review. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 11:** First 100 Days in the Role:  The DM&C informed that he had noticed some slight issues, not just with UUSU but other Students’ Union’s memberships. He had an excellent induction and has a very clear plan for work across the organisation. His findings were:-   * UUSU is a highly skilled and professional organisation with staff who are knowledgeable about their role and the needs of the student population. It is well structured and able to meet the needs of the students it supports. There is a good financial circumstance also to provide the wealth and breadth of services, but these, and the professionalism by which it is delivered, is not fully appreciated both by student membership and the University also. * Comms on the University side did not understand the full role of the Union and Advice Bureau in supporting students through some challenging times. * There is a clear need and desire across the Student Officers for UUSU to have a clear voice on campus which is different from the University. This could be challenging. * There are challenges even in the Belfast spaces. The VPB did excellent work in signage so transition from University space to the Union can be appreciated as not being part of the University. * It is important for us as workers to be visual on campus for the students. UUSU brand of clothing is currently being discussed with staff so students can easily identify them, which is important. * Engagement with membership can be challenging as Twitter is mostly used by former members. We are not meeting our membership through a channel. Face to face engagement on campus will establish relationships. * We have developed a newsletter and are mailing it out on Monday. He thanked the Marketing Team and other staff who contributed to it.   Engagement can be measured through the different links, and we need to get into a regular monthly process of promoting the work of the Union as it is important for students to understand the amount of work being done on their behalf.  There are challenges in that circulations must be submitted fourteen days before publication which prevents up to date messaging, an example of which would be the strike action, however this is in the process of been addressed and minimised.  The DM&C raised a further issue in that students might not engage with comms that come through the University system as it isn’t seen as a UUSU standalone message, and many messages are received.  The Board queried why we don’t email our own members directly, and the DM&C explained that we use the University system as there are GDPR considerations.  He would like to have a way to contact our members through our own bespoke system and the Board felt that this point where we can be within constraints of GDPR is worth exploring in the future.   * The website can mass-mail so we can ensure comms are sent out in time. Email addresses can be collected from the website with the benefit of knowing if more have engaged. * A Survey will be carried out by Student Officers to ascertain how students want to engage with the Union. This will target students who are not engaged and can now see Student Officers having conversations on campus and giving information to students about services and workshopping to increase the visibility of the Union. * A one-year term is not long for officers to be in post. They have so much knowledge, creativity and passion and we need to harvest it and use their talents so that they can reflect on their input and identify their experiences and achievements. * Problems with internal comms are inevitable when working across sites and we need technical infrastructure to deal with this. * We are engaging with staff about comms as a daily chat or digital tea break which can avoid feelings of being siloed and that everything is happening in Belfast. * The work of the organisation is excellent but needs to be packaged so students know about it then engage with it.   The Chair added that student investment is necessary so that students want to run for election.  The Board asked about the progress this year and the DM&C replied that data of representation engagement and clubs and societies engagement differ, depending on who is on the Committee. Data is available and once we have a benchmark as to which area gives which engagement, we will report on what has been successful and what has failed.  The Board asked if a press release or newsletter could be issued to students to update about the brand identity work in UUSU spaces, with a picture attached. It felt that what has been achieved is good and the Union should be kept front and centre as students need to have somewhere to go to that stands alone and differentiates from the University. The DM&C advised that the Belfast designs have gone to printers and the Trustees will see a very different space the next time they meet on campus.  There will be a new uptake of 700 international students, mostly in Belfast with some in Magee, who should have a student experience which is not just to study in but have holistic experiences also.  The CEO noted that a common question of many Students’ Unions now is around maintaining relevance and ensuring that students are aware of us all the time and not just when they are in a crisis. We need key ingredients to have relevance. The VPB offered that Officers were handing out teas and coffees which might have been some people’s first interaction with us. Stress Less was good work. Students need someone who is on their side, and we need to ensure that this is an organisation that has the confidence of our membership.  The D&MC added that the role of Student Council and Student Voice is to hold Officers to account for their manifestos. All the information is on the website with minutes of meetings and Officer’s reports, but students need to be motivated to look at those. The role of Student Voice is key for activities to go to campaigns that they can deliver on. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 12:** Board Agenda and Reports for 2023:  The CEO reported that feedback from the last meeting was for a condensed agenda to speak on substantive and strategic matters that needed to be discussed, with the Chair giving her report, then each of the Directors, where applicable, would report, with the CEO then giving a singular report for appendices. Governance issues are covered but come under one singular item. He asked for the Board’s approval. The Chair felt it was of benefit to her and Officers so ad hoc matters can be highlighted by Officers concerned. The Board felt that being more responsive and getting the right people and having interests raised by individuals to see the challenges here first hand is useful to the Board and will give useful progression. A dynamic Board changing over the years is important, with a continuity to the conversation.  This was approved. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 13:** Reserved Business |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 14:** Any Other Business  There was no other business. |  |  |
| **Agenda Item 15:** Date of Next Meeting: 30th March 2023 |  |  |