Aston Students’ Union – Union Council Minutes

Thursday 28th of January 2021, via Microsoft Teams, 4pm – 5:20pm

82 attendees: meeting is quorate

Approval of agenda – approved

Approval previous minutes – approved

The Chairperson provided an overview of how the Union Council works.

Attendees were given the option to vote yes, no, or abstain to each motion proposed in the meeting via a poll.

Item 1) Motions

* **Item 1.1: The Student Union Policy on freebies and giveaways (UC2021.03.1a)**

*Motion proposes to reduce one-off University freebies and giveaways as a step to cut down on waste material. If external organisations wish to distribute freebies, they must be approved by the Student Union and the freebies must be made from recycled materials or be recyclable.*

Voting: Motion passed

* **Item 1.2: COVID-19 Club/Society Membership Refunds 2020/21 (UC2021.03.1b)**

*Motion proposes to mandate the VP Student Activities to work with the Student Activities and Voice team to create a framework to oversee the delivery of the COVID-19 refund policy for club and society memberships.*

Q: Will this need to be agreed with the club committees before the refund happens?

A: Yes.

Q: Is it up to the club/society committees to decide whether to offer refunds?

A: Yes, it is up to each club and society to decide as a committee.

Q: If a member of a club takes a refund, are they no longer a member of the club?

A: If members receive a partial refund, they will still be part of the club. However, if they receive a full refund, they will no longer be eligible to be a part of that club.

Voting: Motion passed

* **Item 1.3: UN Sustainability goals and Aston University (UC2021.03.1c)**

*Motion proposes for, 1) Aston University to sign the SDG accord as an institution, and 2) Aston University to make a submission every year for The Impact Ranking.*

Voting: Motion passed

Item 2) Board of Trustees’ Updates & Strategy Update

Attendees of the meeting were provided with an explanation of what the Board of Trustees does. The Board has recently been reviewing the strategies and objectives for the Aston Students’ Union.

Attendees were asked for their feedback on what they would like the SU to start, stop, and continue doing.

Suggestions involved:

* Continuing with online Union Council meetings in the future to enable accessibility.
* Continue providing training for committee members.
* Start offering further training, such as First Aid.
* Stop allowing promotions on campus from companies with unethical business practices, such as Amazon.

It was agreed that a survey/questionnaire will be created and sent to council attendees to provide further feedback and comments.

Item 3) Officer Updates

* **Item 3.1: Oral Updates from Full-Time Officers**

*SU President:*

* Continuing to communicate with student accommodation providers to request rent refunds for students.
* Worked with the Sabbatical Officers to create a new webpage on the SU website (“Students Deserve Better”) with information and resources surrounding student accommodation.
* The SU is currently in the process of a strategic review to reflect on the past few months and work to create a new strategy for student experience in 2021/22.

Q: Do we have any chance of getting someone else to take over the campus accommodation?

A: This may need to be discussed further outside of this meeting as I am not entirely sure.

Q: Do you have any plans to run activities to keep students engaged during lockdown?

A: The SU is trying to do as many activities as we can in line with the current lockdown and we are continuing to think of creative ways to keep students engaged.

*VP Welfare:*

* Planning and launching a phone bank to check-in on and support students during lockdown. The phone bank will also create paid and voluntary roles for students.
* Continuing to work on ‘Break The Silence’ campaign.
* Working on a Forced Marriages campaign.
* Leading the International Buddy Scheme.
* Producing episodes for ABCs of Adulting project.

Q: Where can we find more information about the phone bank positions?

A: The roles are advertised on the Aston Futures website.

*VP Education:*

* Continuing to work on ‘Decolonise the Curriculum’ with the University.
* Attended meetings to expand the ‘Safety Net’ policy for students to ensure no students are disadvantaged.
* Working on the Student Representation Framework.
* Working on NSS Survey with the University.
* Planning Academic Integrity Week.

Q: With one of my modules, there is very limited access to e-books. Is there any way to get the library more licences for e-books with the increased number of online exams taking place this year?

A: I am aware the library has invested into more e-books because of the pandemic, but I will bring the conversation up again in my next meeting with the University to look at more possible investment.

*VP Student Activities:*

* Pushing for rent refunds from different accommodation providers and emailing the MP of our constituency.
* Meeting with clubs and societies to improve and prioritise the student voice at the SU.
* Engaging with students via social media.
* Working to create a policy for club/society membership refunds.
* Working with diversity and inclusion teams.
* **Item 3.2: Oral Updates from Part-Time Officers**

*Chairperson:*

* Working on how to improve the Union Council and Union Council meetings.

*LGBTQ+ Officer:*

* Raised £115 on World Aids Day.
* Will be hosting a LGBTQIA+ podcast in February.

*Disability Students’ Officer:*

* Working on an accessible writing guide for clubs and societies.
* Creating a Disabled Students Committee.

Q: Is this committee open for applications yet?

A: The committee is currently finalising the wording to be accessible, but I hope to be able to resolve this after the exam period.

*Sustainability Officer:*

* Working on a litter/waste campaign.
* The Sustainability Committee will be launching soon.
* Green Week.

Item 4) Lockdown Discussion

Attendees were invited to share how they have been feeling during this lockdown and if feel they are being supported in their studies. Below is a summary of some of the comments that were made:

* Placement students voiced feeling like they have not been supported by the University, with some explaining they had received either very little or no contact from the University to see how they are doing. This was particularly the case for placement students abroad.
* ‘Virtual fatigue’ was noted as a barrier for clubs and societies: “We want to keep supporting our members but are not sure how best to do this”.
* Final year students felt like they had not received necessary support for steps after graduation (such as how to apply for jobs) and like support from lecturers has been sub-standard this year.
* EU students voiced worries about the possible impact from Brexit on student loans and graduate/masters’ schemes and asked if the University could provide some guidance on this.
* First year students stated they had not been given information about how the University works (e.g., how to navigate BlackBoard) and have had to figure things out by themselves, and like not enough has been done to connect first year students with each each other.
* Research students are having a difficult time trying to conduct research from home.
* Many students have gone from interacting with people every day to working from home by themselves with no support from the University.
* Mental health has been affected by the lack of engagement, and experience currently provided by the university is not to the £9k standard of many students.

**Next meeting:**

**Tuesday 2nd of March 2021.**