

# Course Rep Conference Panel Debate: Minutes

EEG162 (11:00-12:30) Monday 4 February 2019

## Attendance

**Chair and Host:** Euan Morrison (EM, Vice President Education)

**Panel:** Ross Renton (RR, Pro Vice Chancellor Students), Sarah Greer (SG, Deputy Vice Chancellor), and Amatey Doku (AD, Vice President for Higher Education at the National Union of Students (NUS))

**Also in attendance:** 71 Course Representatives, Sophie Williams (Chief Executive of Worcester Students' Union), Tim Hewes-Belton (Student Engagement Manager), Clement Servini (Marketing and Communications Coordinator), Alannah Williams (Marketing and Communications Assistant), Daniel Jones (Film and Photography Assistant), and Jodie Stilgoe (Student Voice Assistant and Minute-taker)

## Minutes

### 1. Welcome

EM welcomed everyone and thanked them for attending Worcester's annual Course Rep Conference. EM introduced the panellists and explained the three overarching topics of this year's high-level panel debate:

- Inclusion within Higher Education: how is the University catering for you, specifically?
- Value for money is top of the media agenda in Higher Education. What does value for money mean to you?
- What should the future of the University of Worcester look like?

Reps were able to submit questions for the panel debate prior to the event online; they could also fill out question slips in advance and throughout the debate, and they were able to ask questions directly.

### 2. Introductions

Ross Renton (RR), Pro Vice Chancellor Students at the University of Worcester

RR began by explaining the importance of student voice. The National Student Survey (NSS) and Course Experience Survey (CES) launched this week and RR encouraged students to complete both surveys, as feedback received will drive University decision-making.

RR widened the conversation to focus on national Higher Education issues, including the implications of Brexit at the University of Worcester and the impact this might have on current and future Worcester students, for example, Worcester's EU students and the Erasmus+ scheme.

Sarah Greer (SG), Deputy Vice Chancellor at the University of Worcester

SG explained that she is responsible for the academic side of University and works closely with Heads of Schools to ensure that students have an outstanding University experience. She highlighted that on every decision-making committee there is a student voice representative present.

SG also explained about the University's focus on retention and success. For example, the University are thinking about how they can keep students engaged in courses and how they can intervene to help students if they become disengaged with their course. For many professional courses, a high percentage of students who withdraw give a reason that the course was not what they expected, and so the University is conducting research into the marketing and communication of courses.

SG also explained that there has been an increase in unconditional offers (both nationally and at Worcester). She also noted that the University's academic structure has changed from Institutes to Schools and Colleges.

Amatey Doku (AD), Vice President for Higher Education at the National Union of Students

NUS represents approximately 7 million students. AD is part of an elected team who represent all students across the UK in both Higher and Further Education. There are five Vice Presidents and there is one NUS President, Shakira Martin. NUS have five policy zones covering a broad area of issues affecting students: Further Education, Higher Education, Society and Citizenship, Union Development, and Welfare. The role of each zone is to lead a portfolio of work, enable in-depth and wide-ranging research and discussion on issues important to students, and deliver campaigns and work programmes relevant to that area. A Vice President leads each zone, for example, AD leads the Higher Education zone.

AD explained that he spends his time visiting campuses, speaking to students to find out what matters most to them, delivering proactive campaigns, as well as day-to-day issues (which includes tuition fees, value for money, and HE funding). AD is leading two main campaigns: the Black Attainment Gap and a People's Vote.

**Black Attainment Gap**

The Government have highlighted that racial inequality within the education sector is a clear issue. 77% of white students received a first or a 2:1 compared with 61% of BAME students in England. AD conducted research before Christmas with a number of student union panels and he will release guidance on closing the black attainment gap within the next few months.

**Brexit and a People's Vote**

AD expressed his concerns for the following: whether the Erasmus scheme will continue, mobility for EU students and whether they will have to pay higher fees to study in the UK, and the fact that research funding remains the same. None of these concerns are highlighted at all in Theresa May's deal and so NUS are demanding a People's Vote for a final say on Brexit. He also noted that a People's Vote is important, not just within the Higher Education sector, but for other sectors too e.g. the National Health Service.

3. Question and Answer Session

### **Question 1. What does Brexit mean for the University of Worcester?**

**RR:** The uncertainty around what Brexit actually means, and what is going to happen after March 29th is having a real impact. There is a financial concern around EU students as they currently make up 500 of our students at Worcester. The University does not know what will happen around EU students who want to stay on to complete an MA or PhD at Worcester.

**SG:** The University is planning for every eventuality, as nobody knows what is going to happen post March 29th. The University has lost EU colleagues because they no longer wish to work in Britain anymore. The University does not want to become insular. SG acknowledged that there will be different views about Brexit and we must all debate and converse our views in a polite and respectful manner. There is a worry that respectful and polite conversations and debates will not happen, and chaos and riots may ensue as a result.

**AD:** British politics will not be the same again. There are concerns around EU students' freedom of movement and rise in tuition fees if they wish to study in Britain. Students and HE staff have a responsibility to speak up during this time of uncertainty.

The panellists put the question to the student audience. SG was particularly interested to hear of any Worcester-specific concerns students may have.

A student spoke about their concern around losing the diversity of students at Worcester, which they feel makes the University stand out. Students spoke about their concern of others not feeling secure or wanted: students worry that their EU peers feel like they are not wanted or that they are an outsider, when this is not the case.

### **Question 2. Why does University cost so much? What is the money spent on? For some courses who only have 8 hours of lectures a week, £9250 is a ridiculous price. Would it not be better to put those courses into 2 years with more lectures?**

**RR:** Accelerated degrees (2-year degrees) are framed around cost, which is not how students should be prioritising their education. Most Institutions outside of Britain have 4-year degrees. Degrees are this length for good reason. In terms of value for money, at Worcester, staff look at benchmarking data on all costs, from accommodation to facilities to laundry to ensure that Worcester are spending the same or less than the average Institution in England.

**SG:** Nobody is happy with the current tuition fees (both staff members and students alike). Fees are not solely spent on teaching; costs for heat, lighting, buildings, staff, support services, facilities, etc. must also be taken into consideration when debating value for money. Most University courses are set up to help students to transit into independent learners and researchers, which is why contact hours may decrease year on year.

University is not just about getting a degree. University is about developing and growing as an individual through volunteering and extracurricular activities, which helps students to discover what they want to do in life and broadens their skill-set. University is, and always will be, much more than just pathway to 'get a job'.

**AD:** The Government wanted to reduce direct funding to Universities. Due to inflation, income is increasing. The Government are conducting a Fees Review. Whilst this Review is being carried out, the Government have frozen degree fees. Nationally, less 18 year olds are applying to University. This, alongside the Government's statement of reducing direct

funding to Universities, would mean that Universities would not have enough money and so certain services e.g. support services, will be cut.

There is also a concern around differential fees for different subjects. For example, there is a concern that most subjects will drop to £6000 but STEM subject fees will increase. This will lead to students from poorer backgrounds not being able to access STEM subjects, which is neither fair nor inclusive. There is also a concern around class-division becoming a real issue within the HE sector.

The panellists asked students for their feedback around this topic. Students expressed that they are concerned that students do not understand the full impact of differentiated fees or accelerated degrees. Students suggested that the University could organise pop up stalls to better explain fees issues to students. SG told students that they should ask their cohort what they would like to know around fees and what they would find the most helpful. Following this feedback, the University would be happy to organise stalls to explain tuition fees.

**Question 3. As an SU that is composed of a majority of white, straight cis-gender students, how do we make sure that minority group voices are accurately represented by relatively few people? In addition, as an SU, do you feel that we should take a more active role in politics, if so how do you think we can further engage students in politics?**

The panellists posed this question to EM, as a representative of the SU, to answer this question.

EM explained that the SU has 8 Part Time Officers, 6 of which are liberation officers who campaign against issues and raise awareness of a particular oppressed demographic e.g. Women, LGBTQ+, Disabled, BAME, International, and Mature. These Officers ensure that minority voices are accurately represented within the Union and University.

Answering the second part of the question, EM explained that it is very important that students have a say on all matters. He noted that today, and Change Week as a whole, is an opportunity for students to tell the SU and University about the ideas and the issues that matter most to them. It is also important that there is a strong collective student voice as, nationally, student voice has the potential to have strong and altering impacts, for example in Sheffield and Cambridge students influenced the results of their elected MPs.

Brexit is another example where student opinion has been quite different to the national opinion and, with a powerful and strong voice and movement, students have been able to shape and influence debates around Brexit e.g. with the People's Vote march.

#### 4. Closing

EM thanked the Reps and the Panel for attending and contributing to this year's debate. The University panellists will write answers for the submitted questions that were unanswered during the debate. These answers will then be published onto to the Students' Union's website and circulated with all reps.

**The debate closed at 12:30.**