Student Council

Minutes of the meeting held on Tuesday 1st April 2014 at 17:15 in EEG132

1. **Student Councillors present:** Kynton Swingle, Tom Clarke, Lee Collyer, Zac Pritchard, Emily Saunders, Shakil Ahmed, Cathy Sutcliffe, Val Turner, Lauren Adams, Elliott Nixon, Katie Vass, Holly Fields, Deborah South, Mike Wright, Helen Manners, Alexandra Girigan, Letitia Rodgers, Ellen Joyce, Erik Burglund, Sara-Jayne Boughton, Hugo Sugg, Amy Stringer, Jessica Burger, Philip Brookes

**Also in attendance:** Stephanie Johnston (Chair), Paul Johnston (SU Chief Executive), Ruth Christie (SU Membership Services Manager, minute taker), Ella Thompson, Joseph Hayes, Matt Soanes, Jack Buczynski

1. **Apologies:** Wesley Hudson, Luciana Blaha, Chantal Vinyard, James Dilworth
2. **Absent:** Luke Hennessy, Papi Viselova, Charley Goss, Chris Adlem, Charlie Young
3. **Minutes of previous Student Council held on 11th March 2014**

These were approved as an accurate record.

1. **Matters arising from the minutes**

There were no matters arising

1. **Declarations of interest**

There were no declarations of interest

1. **Officer reports**

Kynton apologised for the fact that officer reports had not been distributed to Student Council in advance of the meeting. Some officers had failed to submit reports. Kynton said that his report would be mainly verbal.

**Report from the President**

* The Welcome Desk has undertaken an analysis of student comments gathered during the “SU on Tour exercise” and the Executive Committee will be reviewing this and discussing responses over the coming weeks
* Over the past couple of weeks, a lot of time has been taken up with dealing with disciplinary issues which have resulted in a number of members being banned from participating and spectating in Varsity events
* Update on motions passed at previous Student Council meetings

**Provision of halal meat**: Paul has met with the new catering manager and confirms that the University will liaise with the contractor, Aramark, in relation to the possibility of providing alternative foods, including halal.

**Time4change:** No action has been taken yet on this motion, which reaffirmed the SU’s commitment to continue to put on events for its members which do not involve alcohol.

**Living wage:** The Board of Trustees met on 18th March 2014 and considered the proposal to introduce the “living wage” for employees of the charity. The Trustees decided that, given the charity’s current financial position, it would not be viable to start paying the living wage at present.

**Hardship fund and savings from strikes of University staff:** The sabbatical officers have discussed this with the Pro Vice Chancellor (Students), who has agreed to consider the suggestion that any money “saved” by the University on days when some staff have been on strike might be added to the hardship fund. John Ryan commented, however, that the total sum is likely to be minimal.

**Nightline:**  A steering group has been set up to consider setting up a Nightline service at Worcester and Paul attended the first meeting with the University last week. There has been a positive response to the proposal so far and Mags Godderidge, Nightline’s Development Manager, will be attending the next meeting of the steering group. Paul commented that much needs to be discussed in terms of timelines and the recruitment and training of volunteers, but it is possible that the service could be launched at the start of the next academic year. In response to a question, Paul explained that Nightline is a listening service for students, staffed by volunteers, with a telephone number which students can call at any time during the night. It is not a counselling service, but a listening ear for students who might be going through a difficult time and just want someone to talk to.

**Report from the Vice President Education**

**SLTAs:** Tom reported that the opportunity for students to nominate staff for the Student-Led Teaching Awards opened on 17th March. Nominations close on Friday 11th April and so far there have been 53 nominations. Awards will be made to winners in each of the six institutes of the following awards:

* Outstanding university teacher
* Outstanding academic tutor
* Outstanding contribution to learning from a member of professional support staff
* Best module (undergraduate or postgraduate)
* Most innovative practice

Winners will be announced and awards presented at the SLTA event which will take place at the Arena on the afternoon of Friday 9th May.

**Printer credit:** Despite his best efforts, the University has confirmed that there will not be any free printer credit for students in 2014-15. This is in part due to the need for the University to cut its staffing budget by £800,000 next year. The Pro Vice-Chancellor (Students) has, however, assured Tom that consideration will be given to introducing printer credit in the following academic year (2015-16) and the amount being considered is £50. The cost to the University would be around £500,000.

**StARs Forum:** The final StARs Forum of the year will take place on Thursday 10th April (12:30 – 14:00 in CC004). StARs will be given updates and progress reports on Worcester Weeks, Turnitin and Induction/Freshers’ Week and will have the opportunity to review the StARs system. Wesley Hudson, President elect, will also be attending to give him an opportunity to hear about some of the issues students have.

Student Councillors had a number of questions and comments on Tom’s report:

Q. If the University is to pay for printer credit for all students, do you have reassurances that this will not have a negative impact on other services, such as mental health support?

A. The cost of printer credit would be met from a separate budget, so other University services would not be impacted.

Q. If the University is considering providing printer credit, does this mean that they have abandoned plans to introduce e-submission across the institution?

A. There seem to be lots of problems in relation to e-submission so it’s probably the case that it won’t be possible to make it available for all students.

Q. Could the layout of assignments be changed to double-sided to save money?

A. Apparently the cost is the same for a double-sided sheet as it is for two single-sided sheets.

**Report from the Vice President Student Experience**

Lee explained that, since the previous Student Council meeting, he has been overwhelmed with work relating to Varsity. This has been the busiest and most difficult period of his term of office.

This is also the time of year when sports club and societies hold their annual general meetings (AGMs), when they elected their new committees. Lee is trying to ensure that all of these meetings take place, although he has already had reports that a number of societies will be folding. The deadline for AGMs is Friday 2nd May and training for new committee members will take place on Monday 26th May.

Nomination packs have been sent to all sports and societies committees for the VoScAs and Colours awards, with a closing date for nominations of Wednesday 9th April.

A number of our teams have performed particularly well this year:

* Men’s basketball retained the National BUCS championship title for the fourth successive year
* Ladies’ basketball won the Midlands 1A league, but suffered defeat in their promotion playoff
* Both netball 1st and 2nd teams won their respective leagues and have achieved promotion
* Netball 1st and ladies’ hockey 1st teams reached their respective BUCS conference cup competitions but suffered defeats
* Men’s rugby 1st team won their league and will take part in promotion playoff games later this month
* The newly-formed wheelchair basketball team won the inaugural University championships
* The University is also celebrating the success of Worcester Wolves in winning the BBL trophy final

Q. What’s happened to the results of the activities survey?

A. The results have been passed on to Susie Hart, Head of Recreation and Sport Strategy. It’s understood they may provide evidence to support a funding bid to Sport England.

**Report from the Diversity Officer**

Zac apologised for the lack of a report and explained that he has had a heavy workload recently. He has been investigating the possibility of providing gender neutral toilets, something which a number of universities and/or students’ unions have introduced. He also likes the initiative in place at Manchester University where free fruit is provided for students around exam time.

Q. Where has the idea of having gender neutral toilets come from?

A. Many trans students (and there are a number at Worcester) feel uncomfortable using toilets which are designated as either male or female. Gender neutral toilets are for anyone to use and it may be possible to re-sign some disabled toilets as gender neutral.

Q. What is the idea behind the provision of free fruit?

A. It’s part of a campaign to promote health and well-being. At times when they are under pressure, students may neglect to eat properly and healthily and providing fruit goes some way to help them look after themselves better.

**Conference reports**

Emily and Chantal attended the national Women’s Conference. Emily said this was a great event and the main benefit was networking with students and in particular women’s officers from across the country. Worcester was mentioned in the opening remarks, as an example of an SU which has just established the part-time position of Women’s Officer. There were wider debates about the topics on which NUS will focus next year, including:

* Addressing “lad culture”
* Supporting student carers
* Encouraging more black women students to get involved with the Women’s campaign

One practical suggestion which might be adopted at Worcester is to include inclusivity workshops in training for sports and society committees.

Helen, Zac and Chantal attended the Mature and Part-time Students’ Conference. This was a very interesting day and again, networking and getting ideas from other delegates was one of the main benefits. Zac contributed to a motion concerning the simplification of motions and Helen contributed to a motion relating to Student Finance, which seeks to address the apparent assumption held by Student Finance England that the majority of students are aged 18-21 and are living away from home. Zac commented that he found some of the training at the conference very useful, in particular a session on identifying the hidden meanings in conversations, which he found had a practical application just a few days later.

1. **Discussion on financial support available to students**

Kynton explained that he and Tom had attended the meeting of the University’s Executive (made up of the senior directors and managers and heads of Institute) recently. One of the topics discussed was the 2015-16 Access Agreement.\* Kynton is concerned that the University doesn’t understand the problems faced by students at Worcester. The government wants universities to move away from providing bursaries for students and to focus more on “outreach work” aimed to improve access. This can mean working with children as young as primary school age. If the University takes this approach, the SU worries that its members (current students) will lose out on financial support. Kynton pointed out that current third-year students are the last to be in receipt of the universal bursary of £500 to £700. The meeting to finalise the Access Agreement will take place on 23rd April. Kynton and Tom will be at that meeting but there will be discussions prior to that date, so they would like to hear Student Council’s views on where the University should focus the income it has to spend.

A number of views were expressed by Student Councillors and Kynton responded to some of these:

* Under the National Scholarship Programme, universities could choose whether to provide tuition fee waivers or bursaries. Last year’s first-years lost out on bursaries. It’s fairer to give students £1,000.
* Kynton: The University could choose to provide individual students with the choice of a bursary or a fee waiver.
* Fee waivers don’t give us any help with the costs of being a student and many of us, particularly mature students, are unlikely ever to have to pay off our tuition fee loan.
* Kynton: Currently, the loan is written off after 30 years, but that 30 year limit may be dropped in future so that graduates earning over the prescribed amount (currently £21,000 per annum) will remain liable to repay the loan until death. Interestingly, government data shows that receipt of a bursary has no effect on retention.
* Is there not legislation that dictates that universities have to pay a certain amount in bursaries?
* Kynton: That used to be the case, but the legislation has changed.
* Is the hardship fund affected by the Access Agreement?
* Kynton: No – that’s funded separately.
* Students need money in their pockets. As a mature student living away from home I have suffered financially as I’m too young to be eligible for the full package of support.
* The pot is limited, so it should be targeted at those most in need.
* Some first-year students have had to borrow money just to cover the increase in accommodation charges.
* The old-style bursary was based on eligibility for the maintenance grant. It’s difficult to see how the prospect even of a £1,000 bursary would affect people’s choice to come to university.
* Means-testing is based just on income and does not take account of individuals’ outgoings and commitments, so it disadvantages mature students.
* I don’t think means-testing is fair. As a student mum, I’ve been able to access the hardship fund for the past two years and that’s been really helpful.
* There are students who are considering leaving university because they’re having to take on more paid work just in order to cover the cost of living.
* Even if students are not thinking about leaving, working longer hours can affect final grades.
* Kynton: Another question discussed at the University Executive meeting was whether any cash payment should just be paid as a bursary, or whether students should have to work (under the University’s Earn As You Learn scheme) for their money. Alternatively, should the financial support be in other forms, such as printer credits or credit to pay for food in the canteen?
* Maybe a percentage of the support could be paid as printer credits or food credits, but not all of it.
* Perhaps it would strengthen the SU’s argument for bursaries rather than fee waivers if the money had to be used for educational purposes.
* I’m sceptical about restricting the ways in which a bursary could be spent as everyone’s spend requirements are different; for instances, some won’t need to use printers or to eat in the canteen.
* I agree – lots of courses require students to make extra purchases outside the University (for example, arts courses).
* It would not be fair to make students work for the University – many of them have jobs outside the University so they would be disadvantaged.

1. **Worcester Week feedback**

Kynton explained that this was another topic discussed at the University Executive meeting. Consideration is being given to re-schedule Worcester Weeks, to drop one of them and/or to change the academic calendar. Surprisingly, given feedback previously received from students, one Institute reported that students loved the second Worcester Week, but not the first one. What does Student Council think should be done?

* Many students feel really tired at the moment. With semester 1 continuing into January, it feels as though we haven’t had a proper break. I would scrap the 3rd Worcester Week and retain a longer Christmas break.
* This has been discussed at Course Management Committees in the Institute of Education and there was general agreement that the first and second Worcester Weeks were too close together. The third seemed to be at an odd time too – too close to assignments.
* No-one bothered to come back until the start of semester 2. The three Worcester Weeks are too close together. If we have to retain three, the last one should be later – March or April.
* Masters students benefit from Worcester Weeks. Without them, we would lose 16 hours of teaching. If the University was effectively closed by making them reading weeks, there would be a negative impact on masters students. Another factor is that graduation week provides a lot of paid work for students who work as Student Ambassadors and they would miss out financially if this work wasn’t available.
* Lots of sociology students want Worcester Weeks scrapped. Teaching finished after 9 weeks, so there was no need to come back until semester 2.
* There was nothing for third year students at all.
* The first Worcester Week was the most relevant, particularly for first-year students. For third-years, probably the second and third Worcester Weeks were more useful.
* For sports students, the lack of a “reading week” meant they struggled to fit in the testing they needed to do (eg in school settings). ISES made it clear that attendance during Worcester Weeks was mandatory.
* I thought the point of Worcester Weeks was to give us the opportunity to learn things we wouldn’t otherwise have the chance to learn. History put on some really interesting sessions, but as an Education student, I couldn’t access them.
* Kynton: The content of Worcester Weeks was always intended to be designed at course level.
* Biology students found the first Worcester Week OK, the second not bad but when it came to the third, there was something on only on one day.
* The Business School calls them Future Weeks, not Worcester Weeks. The first was great, we didn’t have enough notice of the second and the third one passed by without anyone noticing.
* Is attendance at Worcester Weeks mandatory or not?
* It cost or lost some students a lot of money to attend, because the programme was different from the normal timetable. For some students, that meant having to take time off paid work and for others, it meant additional childcare costs. Once again, mature students and student parents are likely to have been particularly disadvantaged.
* Lecturers said that they found Worcester Weeks disturbed their plans and their teaching, with the third one being particularly stressful.
* I got that feeling from course leaders too – they felt it was an additional burden.
* In IHCA, lecturers didn’t seem to have anything planned and struggled to fill Worcester Weeks.
* Drama students were consulted about the content of the second Worcester Week and that was really good, but the third Worcester Week was disappointing.
* The change in timetabling was really disruptive and hard to accommodate.
* English language and English literature sessions in Worcester Weeks were really good – filled with guest lecturers, useful workshops and so on. By contrast, the sessions put on in the Institute of Science and the Environment were mandatory and repetitive. As a joint honours student, I saw the best and worst of Worcester Weeks.

1. **By-elections**

Kynton confirmed that there had been no nominations for the part-time officer positions of Diversity Officer, Sustainability Officer or Welfare Officer. He felt that, if a further by-election was to be held in the current academic year, candidates were unlikely to come forward so his suggestion was that a by-election for the unfilled positions be held in October, when first-year students might be keen to get involved. He confirmed that these are voluntary positions. The options for Student Council are to remove the positions from the Executive Committee or to postpone a by-election until October. A vote was taken and the unanimous decision of Student Council was to hold a by-election in October 2014.

1. **Motions from the floor**

Emily proposed a motion to require executive officers to report on progress of motions passed by Student Council as currently there is little feedback. She felt that Student Council should see a report and action points on motions. Others felt that this is something that happens anyway (it did on this particular occasion) but Emily argued that this has not always been the case and there is insufficient detail provided. Kynton agreed that progress reports on motions passed should come out of the “matters arising” agenda item, so there was no need to pass a motion for this to happen. Zac seconded the motion and a vote was taken, with just two votes for the motion, which was therefore defeated.

Hugo proposed a motion that Student Council should have the authority to issue official statements outlining their stance on issues reported in the media which involve or have an impact on students. He cited the recent “Neknomination” trend as an example of an activity about which Student Council should take a stance. As well as making students aware of Student Councillors’ views on an issue such as this, information on and signposts to relevant sources of help and support could be provided.

One Student Councillor asked whether, if this motion were to be passed, any statements made would be the “official” view of the SU and, if so, whether individual Councillors would be bound to support that stance. Paul explained that whilst a decision arrived at by the Executive Committee, whether or not unanimous, would require individual executive officers to abide by that decision and support the stance taken, Student Councillors would not be similarly bound as individuals by decisions taken at Student Council and could continue to express their opposition to the decision taken. Kynton asked Councillors to consider how and by whom the media would be monitored and reviewed for examples of issues on which Student Council might have a view and what the response might be if an issue emerged which just affects one student. Another Councillor queried how Student Council could debate and respond to anything in the media when they only meet relatively infrequently. A further comment was that, should Student Council decide to make public their disapproval of something but go on to provide signposts to help, this was a rather mixed message. If the motion were to be passed, it would be overly patronising to students. Another Student Councillor added that a one-off occasion or action doesn’t necessarily mean that the individual needs help. Kynton pointed out that the last official statement from the SU was to make public its opposition to the proposed tuition fee increase. A reporter from The Voice asked whether The Voice would be bound to support SU opinions. The motion was seconded by Val and a vote taken. By a large majority, the motion was not passed.

1. **New sports and societies**

There were no applications to consider on this occasion.

1. **Any other business**

Katie said that she has been considering bringing a motion to Student Council concerning car parking charges, asking Council to lobby the University to reduce car parking charges or, at the very least, to agree not to increase charges further. She has put in a Freedom of Information request to find out how much income the University receives from car parking fees. Paul confirmed that this was an appropriate issue to be addressed via a motion.

Zac suggested that consideration might be given to establishing a steering group to help with Student Council, as many students currently think that the Executive Committee runs Council. Kynton pointed out that one of the first tasks for Wes when he starts his term of office on 2nd June will be to review the make-up and operation of Student Council.

1. **Date of next meeting**

Kynton explained that a final meeting of Student Council needs to be arranged. With Varsity underway, followed by the Easter break and then Celebration Week, this will need to take place during week commencing Monday 12th May. He asked all Student Councillors to respond to the message he will send asking them to confirm their availability that week. He promised that pizza will be provided.

\*What’s the Access Agreement? All higher education establishments which charge more than the basic tuition fee for any of their courses need an access agreement approved by the Office for Fair Access. This must set out how the University will sustain or improve access and student success. Universities have to spend some of the income from the tuition fees they charge on improving access to their courses to under-represented groups (such as people from low-income households, care-leavers and certain minority groups). This is known as “widening participation” or WP. Some of the money can be spent on providing financial support to students – either through bursaries (which give students money in their pockets) or fee waivers (which provide a reduction in the tuition fee).