



Bucks Students' Union Report to Council November 2020

Tamsin Grainger on behalf of Bucks Students' Union





Introduction

We are pleased to present to the Council a summary of the Union's activities and work for review at the November meeting.

I've broken this down in to three sections. Firstly, a quick re-cap of the final phase of the 2019/20 academic year, then some detail about the work we have been carrying out in the first term of the 2020/21 academic year before concluding with a section about our priorities, challenges and plans over the coming weeks and months.

As always, I would value the opportunity to talk to fellow Council members about all aspects of the Union's work and the wider student experience. If you have any questions or queries, please drop me a line at tamsin.grainger@bucks.ac.uk.

ADVICE CENTRE

2019/20 - a re-cap...

During the final phase of the last academic year the Union had to reprogramme and reprofile our offer to enable us to continue to positively enhance the student experience, provide the necessary support for the student body and importantly, keep our community connected as the term was so dramatically affected by the COVID-19 outbreak and the resulting 'lockdown'.

We have been thrilled with the energy, dynamism and ingenuity of our team and it was extremely rewarding to see how quickly the individual departments adapted to the restrictions in their areas and managed to maintain high levels of activity and meaningful student engagement.

This included, but was not limited to:

- A fully accessible Advice and Representation Service, operating across a number of different platforms
- A wide programme of online events and entertainment
- A regular digital newspaper, keeping our membership informed
- Online exercise and fitness sessions and team meetings for our clubs
- Micro volunteering opportunities and digital societies activity
- The launch of a full online employability festival, 'Strive', with a rich menu of activities and guests aimed at supporting our graduating students into the world of work
- A diverse programme of online additional skills and recreational sessions
- Online Union Awards for staff and students and a virtual Athletic Union awards night
- A winning performance in the digital Varsity!





Excellent

NUS Green Impact
Students' Unions



**STUDENT
RADIO
AWARDS**

2019/20 - a re-cap...

In the final term of 2019/20, we graduated our first cohort of students from our new **Leadership Academy**. We are delighted that in our first year of operation that 25 students completed their development programmes through the academy. After completing the selection process - through a process of one-to-one sessions - each participant was provided with a personal development plan that included a series of training and skills sessions, a mentor, networking opportunities and 1-2-1 employability support, tailored to their chosen field or future aspirations.

We received incredible feedback from the students involved and look forward to developing this area of our offer further. Some of the students had the following comments to share:

"The Leadership Academy is just another thing that Bucks is doing right. Alongside providing me with specially picked skills sessions, a mentor and an individual development plan, it's celebrating the talent the University has to offer."

"I have discovered services I did not realise were available to me previously such as My Bucks Career, which is helping me understand myself better after completing some of the questionnaires on there."

"I love the fact the academy is very personalised and are very supportive, trying to help me reach my full potential."

During the summer period we were very proud to announce that we have been recognised as the **3rd placed Students' Union in UK HE in the National Students' Survey**, which means we have been in the top 5 for five consecutive years. To follow this, we have achieved:

- an 'Excellent' outcome in our Green Impact accreditation
- shortlisted and specially commended for 'Most Supportive Students' Union' in the national Student Radio Awards
- Gold Standard with 100% in the national Best Bar None mystery shopping audit with the Platinum award and 'Best in Class' overall for safety, customer care and service and CSR.

The Union's position at year end...

As presented to Resources Committee last month, and through prudent management, the Union reported a small year-end surplus despite a difficult commercial year – the details of our financial performance can be found in our audited [Statutory Accounts and Trustee Report](#).



2020/21 - what's happening...

As you can imagine, the start of the new academic year has been like no other and we have learned a lot, it's been extremely challenging but overall incredibly fruitful. Here are just some of the highlights and areas we'd like to draw your attention to...

We started the year knowing our services and general offer would have to be different this freshers' period, and a tremendous amount of work went in to 'reinventing' our offer and creating a range of accessible services, an exciting events programme and a varied and rewarding extracurricular package.

Relatively late in the day the restrictions and guidance changed, and the 'Rule Of Six' entered the fray. Once again we were thrown in to a period of re-planning and re-organising to ensure we could offer something valuable to students but still stay within Government guidelines.

I'm happy to report our team rose to the challenge and once again we were able to welcome students, new and old, back to Bucks in the best way possible.

Please see our most up to date [Students' Union Activity document](#) which summarises all the new modes of operation and safety precautions we have put in place for the new term.

Everything was in place for the first day of term, from our venue transforming into an all-seated, COVID-safe cabaret, to our ever-popular freshers' fair being moved from a 2,500 attendee event, with 150+ exhibitors, to a completely virtual online conference with less than a weeks' notice.

Our current key service changes can be found [here](#) – with the message being that we are very much 'open for business'!

Each year, we produce a [Membership Guide](#) that covers all of the services that we offer as a Union, contact details for staff and, perhaps most importantly, the benefits of getting involved. A copy of the membership guide is sent out to all new and returning students in August as part of our summer mailout.

Take a look through our [student newspapers](#) for a taste of student life and to see what has been happening so far. With this year being the first year we have been able to produce the paper in-house through Bucks Printing - saving both waste and money for the Union.

We also released our new [Sabbatical video](#) which shows what the Students Union has to offer and introduces the new Sabbatical officers for 2020.

We have also created this basic summary of our 2020/21 offer [here](#).



2020/21 - what's happening...

Freshers': As mentioned this year, and for the first time ever, we shifted our popular freshers' fair to an online platform and held a virtual event. Even though it was in a very different format, we had active engagement with sports teams, societies, Union teams, University departments and external partners. Within the platform, we were able to have 'live' sessions hosted by different teams and the engagement with students was incredibly encouraging.

Events: Our award-winning venue has had to adapt to the new regulations at a record pace. To the credit of The Venue and Events team, we still managed to promote up to three events a day in a radically different, but fun and exciting programme. We took the steps to change the venue form a 1,200 capacity nightclub to only seating of up to 6 people per table with the implementation of a contactless payment system, ordering app and table service. On top of this, we put up screens on all our bars and entrances, hand sanitisers at every entrance and a one-way system.

Please see this video for a tour of the [Covid Safe venue.](#)

As well as introducing as many as three events a day, during the freshers' period to make sure we were accommodating to all students' needs, we adapted our events offer considerably to meet the new restrictions - ranging from film showings, cocktail making evenings, murder mystery nights, cheese and wine tasting, makeup masterclasses, Halloween celebrations, pumpkin carving, quizzes, Drag performances, Jam nights for live music students to perform and many more.

Again our programme has been adapted for 'Lockdown #2' and you can see what we have to offer on our ['What's on'](#) page.



2020/21 - what's happening...

Launching the print shop: Our new print shop, Bucks Printing, was officially launched in September and offers both staff and students an on-site print and reprographics department to cover all printing needs. We also offer an in-house design service to ensure all orders look great. We can print across a wide range of different media and can produce everything from business cards to wide format posters and brochures or magazines to pop-up banners. To see the current range of what we offer, please visit bucksprinting.com.

Fundraising: We are currently investigating further funding opportunities through Community Impact Bucks, Heart of Bucks and the Charity Excellence Framework that could lead to exciting new projects to better support liberation student groups, our sustainability and environmental initiatives and community engagement.

Wellbeing Month
Monday 12 October - Friday 6 November

CLARE FOUNDATION

Campaigns

Monday 12 October	Break the Stigma quiz launch	Until Friday 16 October
Monday 19 October	Break the Stigma campaign launch Positivity project	Until Friday 20 November Until Friday 6 November
Monday 2 November	November launch	Until Friday 27 November

October talks & sessions

Monday 12	Hope Virgo	12:30-1:30pm
Wednesday 14	TogetherAll demo Personal resilience and wellbeing	1-2pm 2-5pm
Thursday 15	Wellbeing workshop	1-2:30pm
Tuesday 20	Honest Hour - International students	noon-1pm
Wednesday 21	Mindful self-care for mind and body	2-5pm
Thursday 22	Honest Hour - Mature students	10-11am
Friday 23	Mental Health Awareness	10am-noon & 1-3pm
Friday 30	Honest Hour - Women students	noon-1pm

November talks & sessions

Tuesday 3	Finding the motivation for home study	2-5pm
Thursday 5	Presenting yourself online	10am-1pm
Friday 6	Eating disorder awareness Self harm awareness Honest Hour - BAME students	10.30am-12.30pm 2-4pm TBC
Monday 9	Honest Hour - Students with disabilities	noon-1pm
TBC	Honest Hour - LGBTQ+ students	TBC

Weekly exercise classes

Every Monday	Pilates at 7pm
Every Tuesday	Hatha Yoga at noon
Every Wednesday	Fitness Fusion at 5pm
Every Thursday	Pilates at noon
Every Friday	Functional flow at 11:15am

#BucksWellbeingMonth

Wellbeing Month: We secured funding from the Clare Foundation for our Wellbeing Month that took place throughout October – which was extremely well received. Including various online sessions around positive mental health and wellbeing, finding the motivation for home study, many awareness courses and Q&A sessions from well-known speakers. We issued 1,500 free 'Wellbeing boxes' and fitness classes such as Pilates and Yoga and delivered in collaboration with the Gateway Gym were well attended.

Honest Hours, hosted by our Executive Officers for their specific student groups, gave our members the opportunity to talk openly about their Bucks experience so far and raise issues in a safe and confidential space.



2020/21 - what's happening...

Free School Lunches

We responded to the Government's decision not to support free school lunches by opening our doors for local families who needed a little help. We promoted the scheme through social media and the community really supported our efforts, not least our own students, dozens of whom gave their time freely to volunteer.

This gained a huge amount of positive responses through local media channels with hundreds of comments praising the University community for their efforts. The project gained attention far and wide, with two very positive pieces in ITV news.

Local people donated over £8,000 across the week, and a number of organisations supported us in other ways - generating new partnerships within the community that we will build on in coming months.

Throughout the week we only served a few dozen families on campus, who spoke to us about the stigma and a nervousness about coming to the University. So in learning this, we took to the streets and ran delivery services to local schools, community centres and family centres.

Through this activity we have built a network of contacts and have joined with the Wycombe Food Group and the Wycombe Community Board to make best use of our raised funds, and continue this work throughout the winter period.

This initiative has really caught the attention of the student body and has provided us with inspiration for a rich vein of future volunteer opportunities. Beyond that the extremely positive platform this has given us within our locale will act as a springboard for new levels of community engagement and relations.

Students had the following to say:

"Seeing this makes me sure I chose the right uni!"

"So proud of my uni right now..."

"Great to see our university and the students leading the way in the town and showing us how it should be done more power to them."

2020/21 - what's happening...

What we have achieved working with the University...

Amongst everything mentioned we are really heartened that through open dialogue we have been able to contribute to the University's mission and better support students.

It was great to be at the table, working with the University to provide a 'blanket of support' for our members as we encouraged the institution to reintroduce the '**No Detriment Policy**'. Thus ensuring no student will be adversely affected academically during these difficult times. This decision has been really well received by the student body and the University responded quickly. We thank them for taking the time to hear our concerns.

We have also been able to talk to the University about redeploying the **Bucks Emergency Allowance** to support students. With so many of our students suffering financial difficulties as a result of losing crucial part-time work, we believe the decision to expand this form of support will have a hugely positive effect on retention, and we applaud the institution for their timely response.

To further take pressure off the student pocket, we have worked with the university to deliver a limited menu of free '**hot lunches**' during lockdown.

Across the three campuses we offered free paninis, jacket potatoes and pasta dishes to those who needed them, and last week provided over 743 meals to the University community.

We have also recently engaged with halls-based outreach in the form of **delivering free food and snacks to halls** kitchens to help lift the spirits in University run accommodation. The first week we took Domino's pizzas to every flat, so that housemates could continue to observe the guidelines and stay in together, sharing a communal experience. Last Friday, we encouraged halls groups to stay in their 'bubbles' and host a movie night by providing every group with a bag of snacks including popcorn, biscuits, crisps, chocolate and sweets as well as a copy of the Students' Union newspaper, The Bucks Student, and money off coupons for a popular supermarket delivered right to their halls.

Anything we can do to improve the experience of communal living through lockdown should be considered, and with the University's support we are exploring the idea of providing ingredients for healthy smoothies for housemates to experiment with, board games and activities and even a surprise visit from the local burger van!



Free hot lunch!



Whilst you are studying on campus!
Available noon-2pm



The coming weeks and months...

Student attrition and retention will be impacted by a multitude of external and internal factors, however we are concerned that this year it may increase due to the pressures of a global pandemic and the uncertainty from the Government.

We know our university colleagues agree that now is the time to be getting as much right as possible, **delivering on all commitments** to students and finding ways to surprise and delight them wherever possible. We are pleased that the University are deploying room audits to monitor that all of (the reduced levels) of face to face teaching is happening as promised as this is a major source of dissatisfaction in other institutions, with some facing serious complaints from the student body, escalating to demands for fee reimbursements and rent strikes. Acting in a timely and robust manner will help avoid that unsavoury situation at Bucks.

Despite our best efforts, campus life isn't what our students were expecting and we worry this will lead to greater levels of student attrition than anticipated.

Just in the last few days, our efforts have taken another blow as we learned that social and extra-curricular activity is not to commence at the planned end of this current lockdown.

'HE providers should not restart any social and extra-curricular activities when the period of national restrictions ends on 2 December and should work with hospitality settings in the local area to discourage opportunities for students to socialise extensively prior to their departure home.' [See the latest relevant Government guidance](#)

While this may support the drive to send students home safely and in a timely fashion, for those that remain in High Wycombe it's a bleak picture. **Loneliness, boredom and the erosion of the student community** as we know it will have significant impact on our ability to retain students as the term rolls on and restrictions remain in place. We are participating in University-led working groups to tackle these issues with the Christmas period being a strong focus.

As previously mentioned, **student hardship and the lack of part-time work** will continue to be an issue which we will continue to work with the University on. As will **Digital Poverty**, with students struggling with transitioning to remote learning without the necessary hardware, software or Wi-Fi to make best use of online learning. This is a challenge facing our members that we are actively discussing at Senate, Education Committee and directly with UET to work on ways to best support people affected.



The coming weeks and months...

Hidden course costs continue to burden students at Bucks, and now more than ever it's important we address unexpected and often unmanageable expenditure necessary for the completion of programmes and linked to academic progress and success that falls upon individuals. We welcome the opportunity to contribute to the recently formed University working group set up to finally tackle these issues.

We are pleased to see the University committing to developing the curriculum to better represent the diversity of our student body, especially finding ways to be more inclusive for our **BAME students**. In advance of this work, which could take some time, we will continue to encourage our academic colleagues to follow best practice and be mindful of these issues when planning teaching activity. Making simple considerations from choosing class based examples and case studies that showcase Black talent and leaders, to considering who to invite as a guest speaker or panel member could have a big impact on class members struggling to identify with a curriculum that doesn't fully represent their heritage.

Looking beyond these next few months, our thoughts lie with **graduate jobs** and supporting our students into meaningful work at the end of this academic year as they enter what is likely to be a highly volatile and highly competitive

environment. We are asking all our University colleagues what more Bucks can do to give our students the best chance as they move in to the world of work.

One new area of work in which we are currently engaged with the University is supporting the new January intake and a new wave of students joining us for **accelerated degree programmes**. This is a brilliant initiative and our teams are working on a special Bucks welcome to make sure these students receive a first rate orientation and feel part of our community as soon as possible.

Internally, we are now planning our annual **Membership Survey**. Each year we generate over 1,000 responses from right across the student body, asking questions about our offer and service, the impact it has had on them, and what more we should be doing to make life better for students at Bucks.

Their responses help us plan our programmes and activities, reprioritise our work, shape our message and stay relevant to the membership. In recent years it has enabled us to target student groups who have not engaged as fully as others, revitalise our activities programme and grow our work in the area of employability.



The Union's [proposed social space](#) refurbishment project would have huge appeal to the 18+ full time undergrad market and if delivered in summer '21 would support our new recruitment strategy. [You can see what it would look like here.](#)



The coming weeks and months...

Introducing the membership survey has without a doubt been one of the major factors in developing a keen understanding of our diverse student body which has enabled our climbing of the NSS league table rankings, and we look forward to the results.

The impact of COVID-19 on the Union's financial viability

We are in regular dialogue with the University's Chief Finance Officer, and although our projections and forecast are being remade fortnightly as restrictions and guidance continues to change, we believe we can weather the storm. As well as this, we hope to be in a relatively strong position to not only see out the year with all service commitments met, but also in a position to start the new academic year in an incredibly positive fashion. While commercial income has been affected and our ability to trade through our venues has been reduced, other income streams are being investigated and there are operational savings to be made during the new and temporary mode of operation.

Finally, we are excited to see the impact of the **new University brand**. We were extremely interested in the results of the consultation with dataHE and fully support the new direction. Growing the full-time undergraduate body of 'traditional' age students, while maintaining our strengths elsewhere, will be a strategy that the Union can play a huge part in. We know from our engagement data that these students are highly engaged with the **Big Deal** offer and active participants in our programmes. We accept that for this element of the new recruitment focus our offer has to be as vibrant, exciting and aspirational as it ever has been, and we must be well-equipped to deliver a service that's comparable to - if not better than - our competitors. But that's a challenge we enthusiastically accept.

Tamsin Grainger – President

Bucks Students' Union

16 November 2020

