DURHAM SU BOARD OF TRUSTEES

DRAFT MINUTES OF A MEETING HELD ON 28 MAY 2025

Members present: Graeme Osborn (Chair) Dan Lonsdale, Moitreyo Ganguli, Helen Cutting, Josh Loan-Clarke, Dylan Jones, Rob Drury, Liam Isaac.

In attendance: Gareth Hughes, Georgi Lambert, Rebecca Henderson, Martin Horrocks, Lauren Hodgson (minutes). Abigail Taylor, Ellie Dinsdale

Apologies received: Calum Cook, Oliver Davis, Emma Clarke

Any underlined text is confidential and for Board members only and will not be included in papers published on the Durham SU website.

Usual business

1. Opening of the meeting

NOTED: apologies, and no conflicts of interests.

The Chair of the Board requested updates to the register of interests, noting their role at Lancaster SU was no longer and Arkam College role, would move on to Chair from 1 August.

2. Minutes of the previous meeting, and actions

APPROVED: minutes of the previous meetings on 5 March 2025 pending requested amendments.

REVIEWED: action log 24/25.

3. Reports from Committees

RECEIVED: the report from Officer Committee of 7 May 2025.

RECEIVED: the report from the General Purposes Committee of 30 April 2025.

4. Chief Executive's Report

NOTED: the Chief Executive's report.

The Chief Executive presented the report and said the current officers and student trustees will remain in post until the end of July for University Council and Durham SU Board meetings to support ongoing induction and key transition activities. Elections for new student trustees are scheduled for next week.

Durham University reported that the Voluntary Severance initiative exceeded its target. While no immediate action is expected from UCU at national or local levels, potential developments may occur during the upcoming enrolment and induction period.
Concerns were raised about student injuries linked to risky activities, prompting collaboration with NUS on safer societies.

Recent discussions have focused on space requirements, including alternatives for current facilities, leaving Dunelm House and the importance of ensuring part-time officers are accessible to the students they represent. Broader strategic considerations are needed regarding future directions aligned with student needs and expectations.

5. Finance Report

NOTED: the Finance Report to period 9 of 2024/2025.

The Finance Manager presented the report, which indicated that spending had been lower than expected, potentially due to ongoing voluntary redundancies. A £70k redundancy payout is anticipated before year-end, likely resulting in a projected loss of around £8k, though this may vary. The organisation is currently £28k behind its reserve target, but recent cost-cutting measures are expected to help recover this early in the new financial year.

Cash reserves remain strong and are not expected to be significantly impacted. Some overspending occurred due to unbudgeted foreign trips and timing differences, which should balance out.

There are no immediate concerns regarding Native, outstanding payments for the year have been settled, and no further payments are due until December. A recent meeting with the Chief Executive provided reassurance, with a new balance sheet forthcoming, suggesting improved confidence despite a challenging market.

Strategic development business

6. Student Survey 2025

NOTED: highlights from the Student Survey 2025.

The Director of Communications and Strategy and Insights Manager presented strategic highlights from the recent student survey, supported by slides and full report.

Overall, students expressed satisfaction with student groups, noting their value, while feedback on SU representation and campaigns was more mixed. Areas such as housing and induction were identified as needing improvement, particularly for disabled students. Although the response rate was slightly below target and lacked strong international student representation, it still exceeded recent Durham University survey participation.

A key concern was that 48% of students disagreed that they would turn to the SU for advice, but the creation of a full-time student advisor role seeks to address this.

Participation barriers included timetable clashes and financial costs, while feelings of exclusion were more prevalent among international and disabled students. Respect and inclusion scores were also lower for students with disabilities.

7. Subsidiary Organisations

APPROVED IN PRINCIPLE: the establishment of subsidiary organisations.

The Chief Executive presented the paper and said that Durham SU's regulatory framework for student groups currently supports over 200 student groups and is fit for purpose for most but there are around 10 larger or higher-risk groups that fall outside its scope and would benefit from separate arrangements.

This separation is strategic, protecting the SU from potential liabilities, such as the Durham University Charity Fashion Show, which poses a financial risk if ticket sales fall short. Establishing independent governance structures, including trustees with relevant expertise (e.g., fashion or journalism), is also being considered for student media group Palatinate, which receives university funding via the Harry Evans fund. Larger groups may benefit from shared governance processes to reduce duplication. Oversight could be maintained by nominating trustees from the Durham SU board or appointing chairs for each group.

There are also discussions with Junior Common Rooms as well around using the framework but there are concerns to SU oversight due to cultural and governance concerns, though having a framework in place remains strategically useful for the future, but further exploration of options with JCR's will be considered ahead of this option.

Many student organisations lack infrastructure, and the SU is uniquely positioned to offer support. Building these relationships will be beneficial, though setup costs are significant. Exploring cost-sharing and efficiencies, such as grouping setups, would reduce expenses.

8. Durham SU's relationship with Durham Union Society

APPROVED: a position in respect of Durham SU's relationship with Durham Union Society.

The Chief Executive presented the paper (following a presentation from the Durham Union Society to the Trustees) and said this was also being taken to the upcoming Assembly meeting, which may serve as a key reference point for decision-making.

There is a strong desire to resolve ongoing issues definitively to prevent them from resurfacing annually and distracting from other priorities. Concerns were raised about the lack of formal training and unclear disciplinary procedures, particularly considering recent events involving officer conduct.

The existing Code of Conduct, though long-standing, failed to prevent misconduct and is now being repurposed for members.

The EDI representative's response was seen as inadequate, with perceived superficial accountability and a disconnect between stated values and actions.

A £15k consultancy fee was challenged as unnecessary, with the SU offering a more cost-effective alternative that was declined.

A proposal was made to offer support and potentially take DUS on as a subsidiary, with the alternative being to cease engagement. The University's position shifted following media coverage in January, and a paper will be presented to Council in July. While some frustration was noted over delays, decisions are expected after the Assembly and Council meetings, with the University's expectations still under discussion.

Good governance business

9. Plan and Budget 2025/26

APPROVED assumptions informing the plan and budget 2025/2026.

The Chief Executive presented the paper on 2025/26 budget planning, noting that while the grant has not yet been confirmed, a cut of less than 1% is expected.

Approximately 70% of funds can already be allocated, though the budget will remain somewhat fluid until final confirmation, expected in July. Based on current assumptions, the projected change is 0.51%. Further discussion on strategic priorities is anticipated in July, though not all areas may be fully developed by that time.

10. Call of Referendum

TO APPROVE the call of referendum.

The Chief Executive presented the paper and said Durham University has already reviewed this as part of a broader review, and it will be reintroduced into current discussions. A long voting period was agreed upon to help generate interest and engagement, with the proposed timeline also noted.

11. Strategic Risk 5: Legislative changes

NOTE an update on legislative changes.

APPROVED resolutions as noted in the paper.

The Chief Executive provided presented the paper and said the key developments include significant changes to employment law and considerations around language used in relation to women’s groups. Specifically, there was discussion about revising wording concerning “women’s biological sex” to better reflect intended meaning.

It was agreed that this language would be revised and shared outside the meeting, with careful thought given to how such communications are delivered to student groups.

Items for Information

12. Amendments to the Standing Orders

APPROVED: amendments to the Standing Orders.

13. Any other urgent business

NOTED: any other urgent business.