

Emilia Dowse – President and Chair of UPSU Trustee Board

The 2020/21 academic year was a challenging one for the SU due to the continuing prevalence of Covid-19. The impact upon UPSU was significant, with all commercial venues and all premises closed from the end of the first term to almost the end of the academic year. Student representation and support continued along with core services, as staff were enabled to work from home where possible. Staff in the commercial areas of UPSU were mostly placed on furlough for the whole of this period which maximised the benefit of the Coronavirus Job Retention Scheme to assist in offsetting the commercial losses which impacted the whole year, due to reduced student numbers on campus in the early part of the academic year, and then total closure from January 2021.

The impact of Covid-19 on student activity was significant but innovative programmes and support from UPSU staff meant that most areas were able to operate in some form across the year.

UPSU successfully tendered for the contract to operate the on-campus Coronavirus testing centre at the start of 2021. This enabled staff who would have otherwise been furloughed to return to employment and provide a valuable service to the entire campus community. This contract also provided valuable additional income in an otherwise difficult year.

Sarah Gibson left as Chief Executive of UPSU in October 2020 and Antony Blackshaw was appointed by the Board as interim Chief Executive. Antony left in August 2021 having steered the SU from Scotland for 10 months. Nicky Goldthorpe was appointed as Chief Executive in June 2021 and started working for UPSU in September 2021.

Despite the difficult year due to Covid-19, UPSU delivered an operating surplus of £151.3K. Unfortunately, the positive impact of this surplus was, as in previous years, significantly outweighed on our Balance Sheet by our pension liability of £1.864M.

The impact of the pension liability resulted in an end of year net funds position of - £230,756. This deficit is obviously disappointing given all the hard work undertaken

in recent years to improve the financial position, but it is important to note that if the pension liability is excluded from this figure, the Union would be showing a Balance Sheet total in excess of £1.6M.

The continuing ravages of Covid-19 also placed additional requirements on the Trustees in terms of proving that UPSU could be considered a going concern for the period after the end of July 2021. Fortunately, prudent financial controls over the last years have built up reserves in the SU to a good level and this, combined with an explanation of the strategies for managing the organisation going forward, along with the normal letter of confirmation of block grant payment from the University was sufficient to satisfy the auditors.

Despite the ongoing impact of Covid-19, UPSU continued to deliver for the students of the University and although levels of engagement dropped compared with the previous year we still had 1,633 students involved in our sports clubs and 2,631 individual students engaged in our societies.

On the theme of students feeling financially secure, the Advice Service provided financial advice to hundreds of students in the year and calculated that if the students had followed the advice given, they would have saved between them over £397,000. More than 1,255 students were also supported with a wide range of advice issues through the year.

[The 2021/22 Academic Year](#)

The academic year 2021/22 is one of transition and rebuilding from Covid-19. UPSU believes that it will take three years for the SU to fully recover from the impact of Covid-19.

The Trustees agreed that UPSU's strategic plan should be extended for a year to give the new Chief Executive time to start the process to develop a new strategic plan. The new plan will be launched for 2022/23.

The original budget for the 2021/22 academic year was based on the idea that trading would return to normal and that we would see increased levels of engagement from students who had not had access to a normal student experience for the previous 18 months. However, the continued blended learning approach and the cautiousness of

students who are not used to socialising with other people has meant that campus remains quiet despite all restrictions finally being dropped in February 2022. We are starting to see an improvement in engagement in our commercial services but it will be difficult to hit budget given the very slow start to the year. Engagement in clubs and societies is much increased compared to last year but is not yet at the levels we saw pre-Covid.

The SU is currently working on the budget for the coming year, but also rolling forecasts that will take into account the next three years to ensure that we can continue to operate effectively despite the cost pressures we are continuing to face.

Despite all the difficulties faced this year, the Union has managed to deliver a face to face Freshers Week including very successful Sports, Societies, Volunteering and Commercial Fairs. The Officer Team have worked incredibly hard to engage with the University and have successfully campaigned for the University to organise a graduation on the Hoe for the students who graduated in 2020 without a ceremony. The Advice Service has continued to run all of its activities online and this has enabled them to respond to queries and difficulties much more quickly than before. We launched a new SU App in September and we will be continuing to develop this tool throughout the year. We are looking forward to Varsity in a few weeks' time and we are planning several key events including the SSTAR Awards and SU Awards in May and the Summer Ball in June.

Summary

In summary 2020/21 was a very challenging year for the SU in terms of the impact of Covid-19 plus also the number of changes in the staff team. We were very fortunate in being able to continue to provide many of our key support services to the student body throughout the year. 2021/22 is a year of transition and rebuilding UPSU in order to ensure that we are best placed to deliver for students into the future.