

Queen's University Belfast Students' Union
Full-Time Student Officer Report

Role: Union President

Name: Beth Elder

Period Covered by Report: Annual report for 2023/24.

Haigh gach duin (for the very very very last time!!!!).

This year has been by far the most difficult, burnout inducing, formative, exciting, emotional, and laughter filled year of my life so far. I have been so fortunate to have such an incredible team of officers around me who have always had my back from the very first day. It is thanks to the support of these 5 wonderful humans that I have been able to achieve the things I have achieved this year. I love you guys!!!

When I was elected to this post, there were four main areas I personally wanted to work on: Student Community and Democracy, International Student Support, Student Voice on University Committees, and Political Lobbying. I also wanted to oversee several general union priorities: Housing, Cost of Living Support, Sustainability, Voter Registration Drive / Student Manifesto, Mental Health and Meaningful Student Voice in the University and Students' Union – so just about everything then!

Given that you've all been bored with monthly officer reports from me at each and every council – which you've definitely read – I don't want to go into deep detail about everything I have done this year. I'll give you the highlights and if you'd like to know more detail, please look back at my monthly reports, or ask me 😊

There are three key areas that I want to highlight in this report.

Student Community and Democracy / Meaningful Student Voice in the University

This year, developing the student community and democratic structures in the Students' Union was a huge priority. After extensive work on the democracy review over the past year, we spent months developing a new and more deliberative approach to democracy in line with best practice in the sector. This was intended to develop on the Student Associations that we created last year to generate more opportunity for the general student population to engage in decision making.

Through workshops within the union and amongst student councillors, we were able to unanimously pass the largest constitutional change to democratic structures the union has ever seen.

This year, we bore witness to genocide in Palestine, and it was clear that this had a huge impact on our students and the Students' Union. This caused the officers to pay closer attention to the investment portfolio of the University. To top it all off, in the middle of this ongoing genocide, a vote was held at senate to approve the reappointment of Hilary Clinton as University Chancellor – which passed with only two objections: myself and the other elected student representative. This sparked a huge student movement that I am proud to have played a part in.

As a union we used the momentum of the student campaign to Decolonise, Demilitarise, and Democratise QUB to engage with senior university management. We brought together a delegation of students and student officers to meet with senior university management in a roundtable style and have their voices and stories heard. Using this, we presented key asks. These were:

- Reform the process for appointment and reappointment of the University Chancellor by creating a Chancellors Charter that they must sign and adhere to throughout their post to include ethical principles,
- A formal seat on all committees responsible for appointing / reappointing / recommending someone for the role of University Chancellor,
- Increased student representation on Planning and Finance Committee,
- A review of the university investment policy to include ethical requirements,
- A review and subsequent divestment from Blackrock,
- Formalised meetings between the Union and the Chief Financial Officer for accountability and scrutiny purposes.

For a period of four months, I met one on one with the necessary university management to negotiate to ensure that we achieved each of our asks. Through extensive research, support from the other student officers and union staff, we were able to successfully achieve each of our goals. The agreement was signed on March 22nd and is effective immediately.

This would not have been possible without the students who campaigned for the referendum, voted in the referendum, stood outside the Lanyon gates in protest, and who sat in the room and told their personal stories to university management. Because of those students, we were able to gain more control and input into the financial operations of our university, and have our voice heard when deciding who represents us as the University Chancellor, and I think that's pretty damn cool.

Cost of Living Support

The Cost of Living has been a key theme for the union for some time now, and it was important to me that the momentum and seriousness of this issue was not lost. At the beginning of semester one, I fought to get the cost-of-living support group to reform after its dissolution, to present an ask for funding for several key initiatives including the 'Warm Up with Us' campaign, the free big breakfasts, and free exam time hot meals. I was able to secure roughly £38,000 to support these initiatives, plus an additional £88,000 to keep The Pantry running for another Academic Year.

Additionally, through my role I was consulted on proposed increases in accommodation prices. I did extensive research into this, creating case studies on how this would impact a wide range of students and their monthly budget. Despite this, the University decided to increase the cost of their accommodation. In response to this I expressed the need for additional financial support for our students to stop them being priced out of accommodation and university altogether. I have met with the Director of Students and Corporate Services, as well as representatives from the university finance department and accommodation to discuss the student accommodation bursary thresholds at length. Currently, they are set that a household income of £19,250 will receive a £1250 reduction in accommodation fees, and a household income of £25,000 will receive a £750 reduction in accommodation fees. This does not even make a 50% dent in the ringfenced £0.5million set aside to support students in this way. Therefore, I am now in the final stages of confirming new household income thresholds that will impact over 50% more students, and a blanket percentage reduction for nursing and midwifery students who are not eligible to receive this support. The University

also committed to a triple lock for international students off the back of our feedback around difficulties of this group; accommodation price is locked in the duration of their stay and therefore cannot increase, fee's are kept the same as when they arrived and cannot increase, and the currency exchange rate is kept the same as when they arrive which ensures weaker currency does not plummet.

There is a lot more that the University can and should be doing, and work in this area will continue for years to come.

Sustainability

I felt very fortunate to have an officer team this year who wanted to support putting sustainability back on the radar of students and university staff. We engaged in every activity relating to sustainability that we possibly could.

I personally took on the work of proposing a mandatory climate and ecological crisis module for all students. First, we proposed this through our University Management Board and Students' Union Consultative Committee, which we then followed up with the very first 'Citizens Assembly' style event. I organised, in partnership with some staff and students, a Student Assembly for the Planetary Crisis which brought together students, academics, professional staff and grassroots community groups and enables connections to form.

From this, we generated the feedback and identified key areas that the University should be doing better, particularly with education and employability opportunities.

It is extremely difficult to help people to see that sustainability is relevant to everyone, and I used my influence and seat on various senior committees to keep this pressing issue on the radar.

I also re-launched the Climate Action Group, a network of staff and students at the university, after three years of inactivity. Going forward, this will be a self-sufficient and student led space to allow connections between staff and students for meaningful change.

Looking forward, with the help of this group (and in my role as newly elected Environmental Student Association Chairperson!!!), we plan to host several QUB focus groups to generate content for a mandatory climate education module, and bring this to key senior staff to get their buy-in. The structures at QUB do not support this, however with collectivism and evidence of sector wide best practice, the University is heading in this direction.

Overall, the union this year has truly been a force to be reckoned with, and I am honoured to have played a part in that. My time as President has been a total whirlwind but I'd do it again a thousand times over if I had this amazing team by my side. I've said it once and I'll say it again – the Student Officers this year have become my best friends, my brothers in arms and my dysfunctional family and I owe so much to them.

A huge thanks to Ciaran Higgins and Damien – you guys have been REAL this year listening to me and my rants and supporting my endeavours throughout.

It's been a brilliant year, and I won't stop fighting for students until my very last day in post. Thank you for trusting in me to be your President.

Up the union, up democracy, Saoirse don Phalaistín,

Beth Elder