

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

Role: Student Officer Equality and Diversity

Name: Sajid Khan

Period: Annual Report 2024-25

Introduction: As Campaigns and Engagement Student Officer, my role is divided between assisting the development of Union campaign strategies and coordinating student development in Clubs and Societies, Volunteering, Enterprise and RAG. As all officers do, I represent and advocate for students in their academic life.

It's been a wild ride folks. I have arrived at the end of my second year as a sabbatical officer and at the end of my term entirely. This is a summary of the activity I got up to as your campaigns and engagement officer.

This report also contains my activity from Feb, March and April, which I didn't pass onto council as I lost my work laptop - rather than rewrite them, this annual report can serve as a summary of my entire activity.

July - August 2024 (training and conferences)

During this time I entered into my new role of campaigns and engagement officer and took on some of the new responsibilities associated with it, such as - interviewing and taking part in the hiring of a new RAG chair, familiarising myself with Clubs & Societies and the challenges therein, and getting to know the departments and committees I would sit on throughout the year.

As a team we put considerable emphasis on building connections and relationships with University staff early on, and as the year went on I would say this paid off. As one of the returners to the job it was easier to get settled in, but nevertheless it was taken as an opportunity to reset various relationships across the University. We went on a number of tours with the different departments to get a feel for the work environment and had them present to us some of the challenges they might be facing, to help get a holistic picture of issues.

This is also the time where the team goes to students union conferences, to better understand that this is a collective shared struggle and to steal some best practice from other institutions. Aside from the usual conferences of Student Union Trainings with USI and NUS, myself and the President also went to Durham for the Russell Group Students Union conference. There we worked with other unions to establish responsible investment and divestment as a priority goal of the organisation, along with work to research and line up the often disparate institutional approaches to Widening Access to University.

We also made the decision to solidify our line up of Freshers events, sticking to events that had worked well in previous years and ones that the staff of the SU knew well how to

operationalise. This gave much needed breathing room for the new officers in what is often a very daunting period.

Student Housing Co-operatives (September - ongoing)

At the time of writing, the project to establish a student housing co-operative for Queen's students is undergoing a financial feasibility study by EY (an accounting firm), at the behest of Queen's and the Students' Union. The outworking of this will inform how this is planned, with the intention of bringing a paper to Queen's Planning Finance and Resources Committee for approval.

This is a continuation of the policy passed by referendum a few years ago to investigate the feasibility of developing housing co-operatives, and took root from myself, the welfare officer and the national union president becoming directors of the Belfast Student Housing Co-operative company. In September, we three went to Geneva for the Pan-European Student Housing Co-operative Association conference, where we met with and explored some of the more mature housing co-operatives in Europe. We took these findings and to help us think of ways we could establish one for our students here.

In the second semester, we came to the conclusion that in order for this to work, and to take advantage of much of the learnings of the other cooperatives we visited, the most appropriate structure would be a tripartite ownership with Queen's, the SU and the student tenants. This structure comes with the advantages of institutional support, which helps with political, financial and logistical barriers, whilst also placing the co-operative in the best position for long term growth - furthering the goal of affordable student living.

The President and I, presented the idea for a Student Housing Co-operative to the Chief Financial Officer of Queen's, and he agreed to work with us to see if it could work, and to connect us with potential external investors. I then developed a paper, outlining the preferred legal and governance structures for the project. And this takes us to today, in which we are awaiting to hear the outcome of the feasibility study so that we can take the project to the next stage. It is safe to say there has been considerable headway made on this task and for that I am extremely proud, this has the potential to change the map of Belfast for the better and to provide an alternative to the often predatory private rental sector for students.

Battle of the Bands (August - November)

Planning for Battle of the Bands began back in August, though the event didn't take real shape until late September and early October when we began promotion. The initial idea was much larger and had multiple stages spread across a month, this, for obvious financial challenges, had to be scaled back and probably for the better too.

In the end we had one night in November, well placed during the Sound of Belfast promotional week. There were around 25 applicants to Battle of the Bands, and it was a difficult challenge for myself and the rest of the panel to whittle it down to 5 bands for the night. Ultimately, the contenders were the right ones and they put on a hell of a performance

and raised 1.7k for the RAG charities and packed the Mandela Hall out. The winners were "Running out the Clock" - go check them out on tiktok, insta etc. When all these bands make it big, the SU can be assured it gave them their first big gig.

Clubs and Societies Promotional Screen

This was another manifesto promise, to give C&S physical space with in the Union to promote their events. I applied to Queen's annual fund for the money and successfully got half the money and paid for the rest out of the Officer budget. T&Cs have been developed for the operational use of the screen - which will be primarily managed by the Student Officers. C&S will be able to submit designs (within a reasonable timeframe) to be displayed for physical promotion in the foyer of the SU building.

The C&S team and marketing advised that it would be best rolled out for the next academic year, as this will allow for its inclusion in C&S training and give time for any difficulties to be figured out over the summer and with a new cohort.

The screen is being affectionately called (by me) the Saj Khan Screen for Gifted Teens or for short Khan - to pair with its digital display cousin Kevin in the marketing department. <3

Officer Role Review

This year we sought to change the make-up of the officer team to better reflect the activity of students and to line up with both university and union departments. This strategically helps us to cover more of the student experience and also have legitimacy in sitting in broader committees. I played a significant role in the development of these changes, and brought much of my experience from the previous year as Equality and Diversity officer to inform the new Accessible Education post.

Advocacy and External Engagement

Having sat in the Senate and PFRC this year, I have had a level of access usually reserved only for the Student President. This has been very useful when lobbying for student concerns on accommodation fees and bringing scrutiny to University projects such as the Gift City branch campus.

On accommodation fees, myself and the president strongly argued against the planned increases of 4.7% annually for the next 3 years. Whilst we were unable to stop this in totality, as next years increase will be going ahead, we did prevent it from becoming agreed for the full 3 years and that accommodation will need to consult with the SU over the next coming years fees. It is undeniable that there are financial pressures on accommodation, especially in staffing costs (which we support higher wages) and inflationary pressures; it is our stated and advocated position that this increase is too much and risks pricing students out of accommodation - to the long term detriment to the business model as a whole.

We are still in ongoing talks to figure out a way, that should there be increases, that they not be uniform and instead are variable to the rooms themselves - e.g a studio being more of a luxury could get a higher increase and a single standard should get less. Students want

affordability, they want humble and habitable, not luxurious and expensive. There are bounds and limitations to how much we can flex a financial model like this and still have the business break even, which is why we have been pressured to have the full scope of accommodation finances to be clearer in order to find other cost saving measures to avoid a fee increase.

In many ways, this was a no-win scenario, we are outvoted by a large margin on the committees where these decisions are made, and there are limitations to the effectiveness of protest in an accommodation type that is often only a transitory place for its tenants. I believe what we achieved on this front was the best outcome available, and will continue to see what can be done to avoid further increases.

A mitigating factor for some students, will be the increases in maintenance loans for NI students. This was something our national union lobbied for and something ourselves and the other unions fought for collectively. Though it should be noted that it is likely that the outcomes of a HE funding review that is ongoing by the NI Department for Economy, may not be favourable for students - and this is something I and the rest of the team are working on with our national union to influence for the better

I also worked with USI on the constitutional assembly, to help amend and develop the new USI constitution. There, we debated the constitution, elections procedures, roles, standing items etc. This was largely an enjoyable experience, if a little excruciating at times. Questions were raised around the nature of the national unions, as either a union of students or a union or unions and some others around the legal frameworks upholding USI. The new USI constitution is pending approval for a special meeting of comhdail.

This year I sat on the Pathway to Sanctuary committee, which is a group of people from across the university who were feeding into the QUB application to become a University of Sanctuary. This is really the culmination of a decade of SU activism and advocacy to have routes of access to education and support for asylum seekers and refugees. Much of the work this year has been compiling the existing offering by the university and SU and presenting to the Sanctuary appraisal team. We are still awaiting feedback and to hear whether QUB has been accredited, which I sincerely hope it has, as it is only by having an agreed standard to live up to that we can have expectations that are taken seriously.

Throughout the year I have built a strong relationship with the Appeals team in the University. I have sat on quite a few conduct and academic offences panels and in some cases have been a supporting representative of the students brought to them. These are incredibly important for student representatives to be at, I've sat on a fair few where if there had been no student representation I am confident the outcome would have been significantly harsher for the student, or the panel would have missed something that is crucial to the case that only a student is likely to understand. This experience helped to inform our advocacy when it came to the academic offences review - where we pushed for a less punitive system of discipline for offences and one that focused on rehabilitation. We advocated against the 40% mark cap for resits, and instead that it should be a proportional cap to the offence itself. We also pushed for an intermediary pathway for offences to distinguish between serious and less serious offences and that those of minor impact on the

work itself should be handled as informally as possible. The latter of which seems to be taken on board, and should significantly reduce the amount of students who have to go through an often stressful disciplinary and investigation process.

Summary

Alexander wept for there were no more worlds left to conquer. Campaigns and Engagement. Completed it mate.

Jk lots more to do.

Good luck folks. Peace out!