



UHI Perth Financial Sustainability Project: Response from HISA

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Friday 24 May 2024

Introduction

HISA, as the students' association for UHI Perth, is pleased to contribute this response to UHI Perth's Financial Sustainability Project consultation. The project, to quote the Information & Consultation Pack (p5), aims to "retain excellence and minimise impacts on our student experience". That is both our driver for this consultation as well as the essence of our purpose as a students' association: we, UHI Perth and UHI as a whole are nothing without an excellent student experience.

This document is structured as follows:

1. An outline of our current work on enhancing the learning experience at UHI Perth, both in general and regarding the current consultation.
2. A summary of the themes from this work relating to student views about the priorities in learning.
3. A set of recommendations aligned to each workstream's proposals.

1: Current activities on enhancing learning

HISA's core purpose is to represent students effectively and make their lives better. Our regular processes to take this forward include:

1. SVR meetings – at which we consult regularly on student views of their learning, including a pilot approach to use sparqs' new [Student Learning Experience model](#) which from September 2024 will be rooted in the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework.
2. Engagements with senior staff at UHI Perth, drawing on student feedback (including but not only at SVR meetings) about different aspects of the learning experience,
3. Contributions to key UHI Perth committees including Board of Management, Learner Experience Committee and Student Engagement Group,
4. Provision of independent advocacy and guidance to students through our Advice Service.
5. Organisation and delivery of awards schemes such as the HISA Awards and OBI Awards at UHI Perth to celebrate outstanding contributions to the learner experience.

In terms of the current consultation, we have:

1. Met regularly and extensively with Senior Leadership at UHI Perth especially those leading the consultation.
2. Organised consultation meetings in May for students with Senior Leadership Team, to gather student views and facilitate the rooting of student experiences in the decisions that are required to be made.
3. Organised an All-Student Meeting on 23rd May at which views were obtained from students about the priorities in learning in the context of this consultation and similar processes at other UHI Academic Partners. An All-Student Meeting was also organised in March discussion Action Short of Strike (ASOS) and Cuts within UHI. Themes from these meetings are highlighted towards the end of section 2 below.
4. Liaised with students organising independent campaigns relating to the proposals.
5. Regularly updated NUS Scotland and NUS Charity on the situation at UHI Perth and other academic partners.
6. Met with and wrote to parliamentarians highlighting our concerns.
7. Highlighted problems in student communication thus far through our formal statement and subsequent communication with students and UHI Perth.
8. Collated student feedback from email communications and an anonymous feedback form created by the Students' Association.

It is also worthwhile highlighting the work the students' association undertook when proposals were made at the end of academic year 2022/2023, which included:

1. Met and communicated regularly with Senior Leadership at UHI
2. Organising an all-student meeting at UHI Perth to gather student concerns to present to Senior Leadership (see appendix 1*).

3. Liaised with students organising independent campaigns related to the proposals
4. Met with and wrote to parliamentarians highlighting our concerns.
5. Highlighted problems in student communication thus far through our formal statement and subsequent communication with students and UHI Perth.
6. Highlighted concerns from students and the communications around these proposals at the June 2023 Board of Management meeting (see appendix 2*).

The consequence of this activity is that we have an appreciation (as full as the fast-changing circumstances allow) of the priorities in learning identified by our membership, enabling us to identify recommendations for UHI Perth leadership to consider.

2: Priority themes in learning

Due to the vast nature of concerns raised by our members, and to assist understanding in relation to the consultation paper, we are grouping the concerns raised by our students in relation to the five Workstreams as identified in the paper. Feedback directly received by our members can be found in appendix 3*.

Workstream 1 – Academic re-organisation

Changes to the Personal Academic Tutor Role

Students regularly inform us, through SVR meetings and through nominations in our OBI and HISA awards, the positive impact that PATs have on their overall experience and success as a student at UHI Perth. Despite this particular proposal not made clear in initial news around this consultation, students have raised significant concerns around the proposals for removal of remittance time of PATs on an FE and HE level.

Removal of Lecturer – Study Skills Roles with Learning Mentors staffing

Students are concerned about the changes to the above roles, citing that these staff play a significant role in supporting our students with key skills such as literacy, numeracy, and effective studying and that it is unclear what this support will look like if the proposals were to move ahead.

Workstream 2 – Professional Services re-organisation

Phasing out of printing and Reprographics

Students have raised concerns about the impact this will have on students submitting dissertations, theses and final projects considering the academic regulations that can exist around these. Students have also cited the support provided by this department to students who require specific printing of resources and concerns about what would happen with this support should it leave. Students have also been concerned about the additional costs that could be incurred by outsourcing such work as referenced in the consultation paper.

Library

Students are concerned of the impact that these proposals will have as the library is a key resource for success. HE students have said the library can be the sole reason for them being on campus due to their input from teaching staff primarily being online. Students have also raised concerns about the access to digital resources and journals as these have costs attached to them and it is unclear how UHI Perth with work with the wider partnership to increase access to such resources if the proposals move forward.

Workstream 5 – Additional Profitable Income Generation

The biggest concern raised by our students is linked to the decision to close the UHI Perth Nursery, which has led to a group of those who use the nursery to mobilise. This has included hosting protests and generating a social media presence, especially through a Facebook page which can be accessed here: <https://shorturl.at/wVcfH>. In addition, students have created a petition to save the nursery which, as of 24/05/24, has 1559 signatures and can be accessed here <https://shorturl.at/3RQSe>

During a specific meeting arranged between those leading the campaign to save the Nursery on 1st May (to which the students' association was in attendance) and follow up conversations with these concerned students, students have raised the following concerns:

- Communication happening through email from both UHI Perth, and the Students' Association was meaning that some students were mainly finding out about the proposed cuts through the local press. Although protestors were looking to raise awareness of the work being done around this, they felt this was leading to a lot of confusion on what was happening with the proposals.
- Users were aware the nursery was facing issues from when the proposal to close the Nursery was initially put forward in May 2023 (which did lead to a lot of parents leaving which had an effect on income from the nursery), but with the timing of the consultation paper being released surpassing the deadline to register for nurseries meaning that users would struggle to find places for their children for the upcoming year having a detrimental impact on students and parents.
- Nursery staff believing that decision to close was made based on numbers alone and with context, would have been clear could do more to decrease deficit.
- The nursery being seen as a commercial entity but being line managed by the Head of Student Experience,

General themes

Additional to those concerns aligning with the consultation paper's workstreams, the following themes have also been highlighted.

Communication with students

Students have raised multiple concerns with us regarding the manner of which these proposals have been communicated to students and the timing aligning with final assessments and assignments which has been causing undue stress during an intense period in students' academic calendar (alongside the issues outlined in the Nursery section above. This is directly juxtaposing the extensive communications and timelines received by UHI Perth staff, as communicated via email and a dedicated section on the PerthNet SharePoint site. As a membership organisation that needs to have an effective relationship with staff at UHI Perth to advocate for our students, we have been transparent in our communications and updates to students providing information as and when we have received it and understood the ramifications. These communications have been shared with UHI Perth prior to their release, in some instances without knowledge communications had gone out to students (see Appendix 5*). This is something we have made clear whenever we have met with concerned students who have relayed disappointment that we have not been adequately informed.

Students have also raised concerns with us about the way questions were being answered in meetings had with Senior Leadership Team members at UHI Perth and students. Answers were deemed to either not be clear or provide any further clarity, leading students to feel their voices were not heard or taken into consideration. This has been exacerbated by students not receiving responses from the PC Engage email address, which UHI Perth and the Students' Association have been signposting students to. Alongside the action mentioned in previous sections, we are also aware of a petition about the financial cuts which amassed 80+ signatures in one afternoon – a copy of which has been shared with us.



Freedom of Information Requests

We have been made aware that several Freedom of Information requests have been made to UHI Perth which has been communicated to us as follows:

1. Running costs and income of nursery - Request refused – “We are unable to supply this information as we consider it to be exempt under section 33.”
2. Alternative models explored for making nursery more financially viable – “Request refused - We are unable to supply this information as we consider it to be exempt under section 33.”
3. Equality Impact Assessment relating to closing of nursery and general proposals – “Request received after 20 days.”

When information has been able to be provided, students have raised concerns about the detail of these EIAs and how questions around these have been answered in student meetings.

Issues with other commercial entities

Students have been raising concerns about other commercial entities within UHI Perth, specifically around Aramark who provide catering services and teaching provision on campus. Although it has been made clear these are terms and conditions of a current contract, students have raised concerns about the impact this could have on UHI Perth funding if this and other services were to run a deficit.

Regional implications

As with similar and related restructures and proposals at other Academic Partners, HISA has been synergising its work at local and regional level, ensuring that we are able to impact on decisions about learning wherever in the partnership they are taken.

As mentioned in section 1, we have organised two recent regional All-Student Meetings on 7th March and 23rd May, themed with discussions relating to changes and proposed changes in learning and teaching at UHI (including developments at several Academic Partners). Our March meeting highlighted several concerns relating to perceived poor communication about proposed course cuts, impacting on articulation and career choices, especially relating to Arts at UHI Moray (and in no small part due to our pressure the BA Fine Arts degree has been retained for 2024-25). A statement from HISA following this meeting and other campaigning activity can be found on our website. Our May meeting generated similar concerns, including the following word cloud developed through Mentimeter relating to students' priorities in learning, and we will progress outcomes and actions from this meeting with UHI, Academic Partners and through other channels.



Word cloud developed at HISA All-Student Meeting, Thursday 23rd May 2024.

We have also worked closely with staff at UHI Executive Office and related university structures, including the Deans of Faculty, the Vice-Principal (Learning and Research), the Student Experience team and Academic Planning Committee to root clear student communication at the heart of UHI's processes, ensure that due process is followed in terms of mitigating impacts on individual students where courses are to be cut, and promoting our Advice Service as an avenue for advocacy and guidance.

Finally, we have a programme of engagements with forums such as staff development conferences, governing bodies and management groups at AP and regional level, to update on HISA's activities and consult on key developments relating to our representative and engagement structures going into the new academic year.

Irrespective of the outcomes of this consultation and other related processes at other Academic Partners and regionally, HISA is conscious that the regional dimension will remain of critical importance to the shaping of learning at UHI, for instance through networked approaches to learning delivery, library provision and other key support services. Working through our Executive, engagements with UHI regional committees, and the introduction of our [pilot Subject Intern scheme](#) in 2024-25, will all enable us to enhance our activities to root students at the heart of decisions made locally and regionally about their learning.

3: Recommendations

Based on the feedback we have received from our members in relation to the proposed changes at UHI Perth, we as the Students Association would like to put forward the following recommendations for Senior Leadership Team, Perth Leadership Group and Board of Management to consider:

- To make final decisions based on the impact to the student experience and not just the financial savings. We appreciate the responsibility of SMT is to ensure UHI Perth is financially sustainable, but we also have a duty of care to our students, meaning we should be providing services that our students need to achieve academic and personal success. Feedback on the value of student-facing services should be taken into consideration in final decision making so that we do not lose the student experience that we have been praised on by feedback in student surveys and our most recent Annual Engagement Visit from Education Scotland
- In relation to the above, we would recommend decisions around the below as outlined in the consultation paper are reconsidered:
 - Removal of the Personal Academic Tutor hours.
 - Changes to the Study Skills Lecturer and Learning Mentors.
 - Changes to the Library.

- Closure of the Nursery.
 - Removal of Reprographics.
 - All other student-facing services within the consultation paper.
- If the Library changes were to move forward, a clear plan of changes which should include financial costings of updating the space and the digital resources able to be accessed by students as well as a timeline of these changes so disruption to students can be kept to a minimum.
- Ensuring any decisions made at UHI Perth align with and support the other academic partners within UHI. The partnership, and the institution as a whole, is facing financial challenges (as is the sector) so we would advocate for continued partnership working with other Senior Leadership Teams based at the academic partners and Executive Office of UHI.
- Relating to the above, this should include working as a partnership to see the unification of back-end services across UHI so more investment and resourcing can do into the enhancement of the student experience.
- To learn from the mistakes made this year and the previous academic year by ensuring communications to students and staff around any significant changes align, are planned to be shared at times that have minimal disruption to the student experience so adequate feedback can be gathered, and have details which are accessible for our diverse student body so they are able to clearly identify how such changes could impact them – even if at proposal stage.
- To actively involve the Students' Association in any subsequent decision making beyond the role our local officers have as Student Members of UHI Perth Board of Management. This should include as a minimum a follow up meeting with the Students' Association to discuss this submission as part of the formal consultation period, and a briefing to incoming HISA Perth officers on the consultation as part of their handover. As the membership organisation for students across UHI, we want to work in full and constructive partnership with UHI Perth moving forward.

4: Conclusions

This consultation comes at a critical time in our college, university, and wider sector, and it is important that the views of students, and partnership working between UHI Perth and HISA, are at the heart of decision-making about the learning experience. This document gives, we believe, a useful springboard for engagement in next steps from the consultation.

While we offer our recommendations above, whatever decisions are made must be done in partnership with students, and even where difficult decisions must be made, we stand by to ensure that our officers, SVRs (Student Voice Rep) and wider students can play a part in shaping what new spaces, processes and experience are to look like.

It is clear from the information we have provided in this response document, both from our own activities and from other independently organised campaigns, that there are serious concerns about the future of learning and student support and facilities, and about the nature of communication with students.

At a time where, thanks to factors such as discussions about UHI's future and the development of the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework, there are critical decisions to be made, UHI Perth can be an exemplar of student partnership by working closely with HISA on next steps in putting the student learning experience at the heart of decision-making at the college.

We look forward to imminent discussions with management following the close of consultation.

Highlands and Islands Students' Association
Friday 24th May 2024



** Appendices removed to protect individual student data, names and feedback which may be identifiable.*





