Union Council Minutes

# **Meeting Information**

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| **Date:** | **Monday 18th November 2024** |
|  |  |
| **Time:** | **14:00-16:00** |
|  |  |
| **Location:** | **Hybrid; MS Teams & SU 1st Floor Activities Hall** |

# **Attendance Registry**

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| **Role** | **Present/Apologies/**  **No Show** | **Name** |
| **Executive Team** | | |
| **SU Chairperson** | **Apologies** | **Thomas Foley [TF]** |
| **SU President** | **Present** | **Juan Carlos Garcia Belza [JCGB]** |
| **Vice-President Education** | **Present** | **Afia Amanoullah [AA]** |
| **Vice-President Student Activities** | **Present** | **Sayeed Farooq [SF]** |
| **Vice-President Welfare** | **Present** | **Karina Jutla [KJ]** |
| **Vice President Communities** | **Present** | **Taher Gadiwala [TG]** |
| **Women’s Officer** | **Present** | **Anisha Chakraborty [AC]**  **[Incoming Officer]** |
| **International Students’ Officer** | **Present** | **Pratik Singh [PS]**  **[Incoming Officer]** |
| **Disabled Students’ Officer** | **Present** | **Phoebe Allen [PA]**  **[Incoming Officer]** |
| **Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic Officer** | **Present** | **Razwan Siddique [RS]** |
| **Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer + Officer** | **N/A** | ***Vacant*** |
| **Postgraduate Officer** | **Present** | **Rahul Bharadwaj [RB]**  **[Incoming Officer]** |
| **Mature Students’ Officer** | **Present** | **Nibras Abou Al Shamat [NAAS]** |
| **Commuter Students’ Officer** | **Present** | **Ahmed Kousar [AK]** |

# **Meeting Minutes**

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| **Agenda Item** | **Description** | **Minutes** |
|  |  |  |
| **1.** | **Welcome** | **President (JCGB) chaired the meeting in TF's absence.**  **JCGB welcomed students to Council.**  **JCGB provided a concise overview of the purpose of the Council, emphasizing its key roles and responsibilities. The primary functions include:**   * **Holding the Executive Committee accountable for their actions and decisions.** * **Submitting and voting on motions aimed at bringing about meaningful changes within the Students' Union (SU) and the University.**   **JCGB also highlighted the importance of maintaining annual quoracy, which is set at 50 members. He confirmed that the current meeting meets this requirement and is therefore quorate, enabling the Council to proceed with its agenda effectively.** |
| **2** | **Approval of any appointments delegated to Union Council** |  |
| **2.1** | External Trustee for the SU Board of Trustees approval – Wayne Smith | **President (JCGB) informed the Council of the need to approve the appointment of Wayne Smith as an external trustee for the Students' Union (SU) Trustee Board.**  **JCGB provided a brief overview of the Trustee Board's purpose, explaining that it is responsible for:**   * **Approving motions and decisions that guide the SU’s operations.** * **Ensuring the SU functions effectively and in the best interest of its members.**   **JCGB emphasized Wayne Smith’s extensive experience and noted that he is already contributing positively to the Trustee Board.**  **A vote was conducted via a show of hands, with the External Trustee being approved by a majority.** |
| **3.** | **Apologies for Absence** |  |
| **3.1** |  | **Above in Attendance Registry. President (JCGB) acknowledged that 1 apology had been received.** |
| **4.** | **Previous Minutes** |  |
| **4.1** | **4.1 – UC2023.11** | **President (JCGB) noted minutes for the previous meeting are available and Council will need to approve them** |
| **5.** | **Matters Arising from previous meeting** |  |
|  |  | **No matters arising** |
| **6.** | **Executive Committee Plan Updates** |  |
|  |  | **President (JCGB) invited the Full-Time Sabbatical officers to introduce themselves and their updates.**  **JCGB provided the Council with an update on his achievements during the current academic year. Using the Union Council presentation as a visual aid, he highlighted completed goals and ongoing initiatives.**  **JCGB referred to the following ongoing goals:**   * **Aligning the Students’ Union’s 2030 strategy with the University’s overarching goals and vision.** * **Strengthening accountability measures for student volunteers.** * **Working closely with ASET (Aston Student’s Union Events Team) to ensure they are supported and provided with opportunities to develop their skills.** * **Bringing speakers to the SU, following from the successful Ben Francis event from earlier in the term** * **Leading on the transformation of the one Aston one experience movement.**   **Questions were invited. None were asked.**  **VPW (KJ) provided the Council with an update on her focus for the academic year, which has been supporting students through the cost-of-living crisis. She outlined several key initiatives aimed at addressing this issue:**   * **Wellbeing Package: A bi-weekly initiative where students can apply for essential items, including food and toiletries.** * **Free Breakfasts: Held every Wednesday, offering students an opportunity to sign up and attend for free breakfast.**   **KJ also shared details about her major campaign for the year:**   * **"Never Ovary acting" Campaign: A period poverty initiative encouraging donations of menstrual products. Clubs and societies will collaborate with KJ to attempt breaking the record for the longest line of pads, currently set at 51,000.**   **Additional ongoing and future plans include:**   * **Launching a termly wellbeing survey, with the first one set to open in December, and continuing each term.** * **Establishing a Welfare Committee of volunteers to support welfare-related campaigns, including KJ’s personal campaigns.** * **Collaborating with the library and Aston on a Neurodiversity Café to create a supportive space for neurodivergent students.** * **Developing a Cost-of-Living section on the SU website**   **Questions were invited. None were asked.**  **VPSA (SF) provided an update on his aims, achievements, and ongoing initiatives for the academic year, focusing on enhancing support for student activities. Key highlights included:**   * **Funding and Support for Clubs: Securing additional funding for clubs, including hiring extra coaches for sports teams.** * **Game Changer Campaign: Successfully launched on November 14th, with strong attendance from committee members.** * **Financial Incentives: Introducing rewards for clubs and societies that demonstrate innovation in inclusivity and engagement.** * **Hidden Gem Campaign: Showcasing lesser-known clubs and societies during the Clubs and Societies Fair. This campaign included prizes, such as the Vice-Chancellor’s Prize.** * **Club and Society Collaborations: Supporting successful collaborations, including events like Garba Night and Halloween celebrations, with plans to continue fostering partnerships.** * **Student Activities Executive Committee: Establishing a full executive committee to oversee and support student activities effectively.**   **Questions were invited. None were asked.**  **VPE (AA) updated the Council on her plans and achievements for the academic year, emphasizing student representation and engagement. Key highlights included:**   * **Enhanced Student Rep Engagement: Achieving higher levels of engagement with student representatives this year.** * **Student Rep Hub: Hosting sessions every two weeks with a minimum of 50 attendees per session.** * **Accountability and Recognition: Introducing systems to hold student reps accountable while implementing reward and recognition initiatives to celebrate their contributions.** * **Student Rep of the Month: Launching an initiative to highlight and reward outstanding student reps.** * **Student Rep Implementation Group: Chairing a group to collaborate with the University on improving the student rep system and ensuring updates are effectively communicated between the SU and University.** * **School Rep Collaboration: Supporting school reps in creating communication channels with student reps to help close the feedback loop and address student concerns efficiently.**   **Future and Ongoing Plans VPE (AA):**   * **Let’s Chat Survey: Open for two weeks to collect feedback on academic experiences, providing quantifiable insights and offering incentives for participation.** * **Union Senate: Engaging with the University Executive on six key topics to strengthen collaboration and address student concerns.** * **Academic Awards: Event to recognize and reward academics and student reps, with plans to launch in January.**   **Questions were invited. None were asked.**  **VC(TG) provided an update on his goals, achievements, and ongoing initiatives for the academic year:**   * **Aston STAR Group**   + **Supporting asylum-seeker and refugee students to thrive in the UK.**   + **Focus on maintaining Aston’s *University of Sanctuary* status.**   + **Collaboration with CRÈME (Centre for Research in Ethnic Minority Entrepreneurship).** * **Sticky Campus Initiative**   + **Promoting inclusivity through events and activities designed to create a welcoming atmosphere.**   + **Encouraging students to remain on campus, fostering community and connection.** * **Partnership with Citizens UK**   + **Strengthening relationships with external organizations to empower students and amplify SU's voice with decision-makers.** * **Legacy Building**   + **Laying the foundation for a strong transition for the next VP Communities, ensuring continuity and sustainability of current initiatives.**   **Questions were invited. Two questions were asked from the Online Attendees.**  **Questions from Online Attendees:**   * **What do you mean by a Sticky Campus?**   **The term, frequently used by the Vice Chancellor, refers to organizing engaging events on campus to bring students together and build a sense of community. Examples include the Diwali celebration held last week.**   * **How is the STAR group related to our current student population?**   **We currently have Scholar students at Aston and the aim is to integrate these groups more effectively into the wider Aston community.**  **President (JCGB) invited the current voluntary and incoming voluntary officers to introduce themselves to the Council.** |
| **7.** | **Reports from other bodies** |  |
| **7.1** |  | **No Reports submitted** |
| **8.** | **Motions for debate from Executive Committee** |  |
|  |  | **No Motions submitted** |
| **9.** | **Motions for debate from other Student Members** |  |
| **9.1** | **9.1 UC2024.11**  *Motion – Expanding Resources to Support Student Activities (Clubs and Societies)* | **VPSA (SF) provided an overview of the motion's purpose, highlighting the impact of recent funding cuts:**   * **Funding Reduction Impact:**   + **The University reduced the SU block grant funding this academic year, leading to SU staff cuts, particularly within the Activities team.**   + **Societies are currently operating with only 1.5 staff members, causing delays in communication, slow responses, and event approval backlogs for student groups.**   + **Funding cuts has also reduced the scale of SU events, negatively affecting the overall student experience.** * **Need for Increased Funding:**   + **SF emphasized that additional funding would enable the SU to organize more events and provide better resources, thereby enhancing student experiences.**   + **JCGB (President) pointed out that three separate motions submitted to the council request additional resources for clubs and societies, underscoring the widespread need.**   **Questions from Online Attendees:**   * **Has this been discussed at the Trustee Board level?**   + **SF confirmed that the issue has been raised with the Trustee Board, but no additional funding has been secured.**   **Questions and Comments from the Room:**   * **Plan for Data Collection:**   + **A student raised concerns about the time and resources needed to collect data demonstrating the positive impact of additional funding.**   + **They noted that collecting evidence to justify funding requests diverts limited resources from essential tasks.** * **Funding Source Concerns:**   + **An attendee asked where the proposed additional funds would come from, given the limited block grant budget, and whether cuts to other areas are planned.**   + **JCGB and SF clarified that clubs and societies are not being asked to pay more, nor are their current funds being cut. The funding reduction only impacted staff positions, and the request is for funds to support administrative staff.** * **Prioritization of Funding:**   + **A question online was raised about the prioritization of funding within student activities. Clubs and societies expressed a need for more staff resources rather than event funding.**   + **JCGB explained that different types of funding are involved: the current request focuses on administrative support, not event organization.**   **Vote on the Motion:**   * **A show of hands was conducted to gauge the chances of approval for the motion. The majority indicated support.** |
| **9.2** | **9.2 UC2024.11**  *Motion – Introduction of a Creative Space at Aston University* | **The Fashion Society presented their motion which calls for more creative spaces on campus, outlining its purpose and objectives:**   * **The Fashion Society outlined the purpose of the motion:**   + **Advocate for the introduction of more creative spaces on campus for both personal and course-related use.**   + **Foster a sense of community through shared creative activities.** * **They outlined the definition and benefits of creative spaces:**   + **Definition: A dedicated area where students can engage in activities such as painting, designing clothes, collaborating, networking, and expressing themselves creatively.**   + **Survey Findings: The Fashion Society conducted a survey, which showed significant student demand for such spaces.** * **They outlined the key benefits of a creative space.**    + **Addressing the gap in creative facilities at a business-focused university like Aston.**   + **Encourages self-expression and showcases artistic talent.**   + **Supports portfolio building for future opportunities.**   + **Promotes a stronger sense of community on campus.**   + **Enhances mental health through creative outlets.**   + **Creates economic opportunities by blending creative and business skills.**   **Questions and Comments:**   * **Specific Space and Funding:**   + **Question from online attendees: Is there a specific space in mind, and who would fund it?**   + **Response: JCGB (President) explained that this motion is the initial step. The SU and University will determine space allocation and funding based on student demand.**   + **Fashion Society representatives emphasized that even a single room would be a good starting point.** * **Space Allocation Concerns:**   + **SF and JCGB mentioned ongoing discussions with the University about relocating the design factory. They stressed that the final decision rests with the University.** * **Accessibility and Bookings:**   + **Question from online attendees: Will the space be open access, or will bookings be required?**   + **Response: There were discussions about accessibility, with suggestions that booking might be necessary depending on demand and staff availability. JCGB indicated that these details would be finalized as the motion progresses.**   **Vote on the Motion:**   * **A show of hands was conducted to gauge the chances of approval for the motion. The majority indicated support.** |
| **9.3** | **9.3 UC2024.11**  *Motion – Adding Aston Students’ Events Team (ASET) to the Bye Laws* | **Members of the ASET team presented their motion, detailing its objectives and the value it adds to the SU.**   * **Members of the ASET team explained the main purpose of the Motion:**   + **ASET aims to be officially recognized within the SU by adding it to the SU byelaws as an official volunteer group.**   + **The group has been operational for over two years, providing crucial support to the SU.** * **They gave an overview of ASET:**   + **The team assists with organizing and managing SU events, contributing to both small and large-scale activities.**   + **They support clubs and societies with event planning, marketing, and financial guidance.**   + **ASET enhances the overall student experience through active community involvement.** * **They explained the key contributions:**   + **Helps develop professional skills for volunteers.**   + **Plays a significant role in event coordination and SU operations without a dedicated budget.**   **Questions and Responses:**   * **Budget Concerns:**   + **Question from online attendees: Where will ASET’s budget come from? Are they organizing events while the SU already faces funding challenges?**   + **ASET’s Response: The group has operated without a budget for the past two years. Funding depends on the nature of the events and available resources.** * **Support Without Funding:**   + **Question from online attendees: How will the SU support ASET if no dedicated funding exists?**   + **JCGB’s (president) Response: The SU is in discussions with the university to secure additional funding for events, which would overall improve student experience.** * **Sponsorship Potential:**   + **Question from the floor: Could sponsorships cover the costs associated with recognizing ASET as an official group?**   + **ASET Team’s Response: Yes, sponsorships will be pursued. Any funding obtained will benefit the SU, not just ASET members.**   **Vote on the motion:**   * **A show of hands was conducted to gauge the chances of approval for the motion. The majority indicated support.** |
| **9.4** | **9.4 UC2024.11**  *Motion – Support, Resources and Recognition for the Sports Clubs at Aston* | **VPSA (SF) presented the motion, highlighting the need to improve support and resources for sports clubs within the SU. This initiative addresses structural gaps, not funding issues.**   * **SF highlighted the following key issues:**   + **Recognition of Sports Clubs:**     - **The University needs to better acknowledge sports clubs and the students who represent the institution in competitions.**   + **Coaching Challenges:**     - **Limited coaching time is available.**     - **No head coach is currently in place.**     - **Recruitment delays are due to incomplete HR processes managed by the University.**   **JCGB emphasized the importance of “getting the basics right.” Examples include providing rewards for teams advancing in their leagues and offering more consistent support.**   * **Student Feedback:**   + **A student member pointed out that placement years lead to high turnover in sports clubs, affecting team consistency. They suggested that rewards should consider long-term improvements over multiple years to ensure fairness.**   + **Response: JCGB and SF acknowledged this point and agreed it should be considered when implementing changes.**   **Vote on the Motion:**   * **A show of hands was conducted to gauge the chances of approval for the motion. The majority indicated strong support.** |
| **10.** | **Guest Speakers not related to the Motions debate** |  |
| **10.1.** |  | **No Guest Speakers** |
| **11.** | **Other Business Approved by the Chair** |  |
|  |  | **No Other Business Submitted** |
| **12.** | **Business that has arisen since the 7-day deadline for items and deemed to be an emergency by the Chair** |  |
| **12.1** | **12.1 UC202411**  *Emergency Motion: Students feeling safe in the SU: Security presence.* | **The motion was presented by two student members, addressing the removal of security in the SU building and its impact on student safety.**   1. **The two students highlighted the following key issues:**    * **Previous Security Team:**      + **The former SU security team was praised for creating a safe, welcoming environment for students.**      + **They were approachable and prioritized student safety and welfare.**    * **Current Situation:**      + **Since September, there has been an increase in anti-social behaviour, including:**        - **Drug use (e.g., marijuana).**        - **Non-students entering the building and behaving disruptively.**        - **Incidents in bathrooms, including door banging.**        - **Instances were highlighted where student ambassadors brought younger students (children) into the SU, raising additional safety concerns for the children.**    * **Security Removal:**      + **Security was removed due to SU budget cuts influenced by higher decision-makers at the University.**      + **Current staff managing security duties are bar staff, many of whom are students and not trained for such responsibilities.**   **Key Questions and Responses:**   * **Question from Online Attendees: Is Security Managed by the Lounge Now?**   + **The Students Response: The Lounge employs bar staff, but they are not trained security personnel, making it unfair to expect them to handle safety issues.** * **Question from Online Attendees: Why Was Security Removed in the First Place? How Is Student Safety Managed Now?**   + **The Students Response: Security was affected by budget cuts. Conversations about restoring security or alternative measures are still pending.** * **Question from Online Attendees: Can Campus Safety Team Communication Be Improved?**   + **JCGB (President): Conversations with the University’s campus safety team will need to occur, contingent on the motion passing.** * **Question from Online Attendees: Does This Motion Propose Banning Non-Aston Students?**   + **Response: No, the aim is to deter bad behaviour, not to exclude non-Aston students entirely.** * **Question from Online Attendees: Backup Plan if the Old Security Team Cannot Return:**   + **Response: Any trained security team would suffice as the situation requires immediate attention.** * **Comments from Students:**   + **Multiple attendees, both in-person and online, expressed admiration for the former security team, highlighting their friendliness, professionalism, and prioritization of student welfare.**   **Vote on the Motion:**   * **A show of hands was conducted to gauge the chances of approval for the motion. The majority indicated strong support.** |
| **12.2** | **12.2 UC202411**  *Emergency Motion: SAVETHEGREEN* - *SAVE OUR GREEN STUDENT ACCOMMODATION* | **President (JCGB) presented an emergency motion concerning The Green, Aston SU’s student accommodation.**   * **JCGB gave an overview of the background information:**   + **The Green’s Importance: A non-profit student accommodation operating for 44 years, housing 200 students annually.**   + **Affordability: Known for offering one of the lowest rents in Birmingham, benefiting Aston students.**   + **Ownership Issue:**     - **The landowners have unofficially communicated that they do not want students living on the property.**     - **No official notice has been provided, despite the agreement requiring 12 months' notice.** * **JCGB highlighted the Implications of the Issue:**   + **The potential closure of The Green would:**     - **Force students to seek more expensive accommodations.**     - **Set a precedent for other providers to raise rents.**   + **Aston SU is unique as the only SU managing its own accommodation.** * **JCGB highlighted the Motion’s Objectives:**   + **Mandate the SU and its officers to campaign and take all necessary actions to prevent the closure of The Green.**   + **Engage students to support campaigns, attend meetings, and participate in events to amplify the issue.**   **Questions and Responses:**   * **Landlord Intentions:**   + **Question: Why does the landlord want students off the property, and have negotiations occurred?**   + **JCGB’s Response: The landlord mentioned during an inspection that they want to repurpose the land, but no negotiations have occurred.** * **Notification and Planning:**   + **Question: When was the SU informed, and has the Trustee Board planned for such risks?**   + **Response: The SU was informed last week. This will be discussed in the next Trustee meeting.** * **Trustee and External Support:**   + **Question: Are trustees leveraging all resources, such as a local city councillor, to address this?**   + **Response: This is being explored, and the National Union of Students (NUS) has already been contacted for additional support.** * **Contingency Plan:**   + **Question: What happens if the campaign is unsuccessful?**   + **TG (VPC): There are various strategies in place to achieve smaller wins, even if the overall campaign doesn’t succeed.** * **Student Involvement:**   + **Question: What is expected of students, and what are the next steps?**   + **Response: The SU is preparing for legal action and awaiting legal procedures to determine the next steps. Student participation will be crucial in campaign efforts.**   **Vote on the Motion:**   * **A show of hands was conducted to gauge the chances of approval for the motion. The majority indicated support.** |

# **Next Meeting Information**

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| **Date:** | **18th February 2024** |
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| **Time:** | **2-4pm** |
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| **Location:** | **1st Floor Activity Hall and Microsoft teams** |