

Freshers' Student Parliament – Minutes

Thursday 17th September, 3pm – 5pm on Zoom

Democracy Convenor (DC): Kyle McGettigan

Officers in attendance: Kayla-Megan Burns (President), Ru Wallace (VP Community), Chelbi Hillan (VP Education), Rachel Cairns (VP Inclusion), Eilidh Sneddon (VP Sport), Benn Rapson (VP Welfare), Aspen Lynch (Disabled Students' Rep), Victoria Welsh (Faculty Rep Business), Marc Schachtsiek (Faculty Rep Engineering), Emily McIlhatton (Faculty Rep Humanities & Social Sciences), Andrew Merchant (Faculty Rep Science), Anna McKinley (International Students Rep), Vinny Williamson (LGBT+ Rep)

Staff in attendance: Leo Howes (Head of Student Engagement), Adam Crawley (Policy & Campaigns Co-ordinator), Stuart Edgar (Social Media & Content Officer)

There were 13 students in attendance.

1) Welcome and approval of previous minutes

DC welcomes attendees to Parliament and notes that this meeting is being livestreamed. DC takes the minutes from the previous Student Parliament as read.

2) Exec Committee Minutes

Kayla explains that the meetings are weekly and that the ones in the papers cover the summer. Welcome questions.

3) Meet Your Exec

DC introduces the exec committee.

Kayla: President for the year. Elected on a manifesto that looks at fair funding, sustainability matters, and free transport. COVID-19 biggest thing – massive impact on students. Looking at student fees and finance as well as accessibility. Very keen on sustainability.

Benn: VP Welfare at Union. Student wellbeing, mental health, housing, finance. Trying to make student life a bit better. Making sure comms are clear. Looking at resources for mental health, jobs for students, amongst other points. Will talk about Student Mental Health Agreement, as well as action groups and housing co-op. Lovely to see everyone.

Rachel: VP Inclusion, second year officer. Worked on Gender Based Violence and accessibility. Looking at Decolonising the Curriculum – there's a lot more we can be doing to doing. Looking at specific counselling for demographics. Do a lot of activism throughout the year, including work around history months and 16 days of action. If you want to get involved, let me know. Kayla and I are working on a anti-hate campaign.

Chelbi: VP Education. My remit covers academic issues and representation. Looking at accessibility to education, though flexible learning has benefitted. Wanting to keep flexible learning model. Predecessor did lots of work around Decolonising the Curriculum, and how to shape Strathclyde. All the work we do affects your education, so everything is connected - drop me a message if you need anything.

Eilidh: VP Sport, looking at accessibility for sport, including Strath Active and liberation access to sports. Lots of breakthroughs in summer around disability sport. Looking at sponsorship opportunities. Looking at educational training programme for clubs. This is a big focus for me.

Ru: VP Community. Look after clubs and societies, look at volunteering and sustainability. Looking at food waste reduction in halls, looking at direct environmental action, working with PostGs to look at development opportunities, working with Doctoral Research Group, making people aware of benefits with volunteering. Looking at improving the shows at the Union, including Cascada. Working with a number of sustainability policies – and done lots over the summer re COVID.

DC welcomes questions for the exec. No questions, moves to next agenda item.

4) Student Mental Health Agreement

Benn: Proposal by Benn and Eilidh – the bulk of the work done by previous officers. Worked with Disability and Wellbeing service. COVID-19 happened and delayed. Each section has actions and measures, checking that departments do what they say – process at the end to renew each year, through the SEC.

Eilidh: A lot of work done and its beginning to form shape. Today looking for approval and any feedback and any review.

DC welcomes questions.

Anna: I think that it's the right thing to put forward and congratulates the officers for doing. A lot more could be done for mental health within this paper. We said as a Parliament that there should be more focus on mental health on campus – this paper focuses on physical health as well. We talk about it a lot but there's not always a lot about mental health. Next year should look to facilitate more mental health support.

Aspen: Under social inclusion, would this have targeted support for different liberation/under-represented groups. Is it just broadly or specific?

Eilidh: Doesn't have at the moment but like to include for the next year.

Benn: Agree with that. Agree with anna about mental health, more to do in next years draft. This relies on some old data. We could have abandoned the draft and start again but felt it would be better to have something to improve and recognise the work already put in.

Chelbi: Really good paper, and know that it can take a long time to access. This is a foot in the door at the moment – we have a lot of work to do

Rachel: Thanks for the work that's gone into this. We're always looking for progress and this document is designed to be improved.

Eilidh: would add that the university departments know this is a working document and want to improve it. They've committed to working on this too.

DC opens questions from other attendees.

Student: Is it going to be promoted that this agreement is going to be made?

Eilidh: Benn and I would love to get this shared round social media, and would also welcome other students being involved.

Benn: The Uni will also promote this as this links to their funding, so it will be shared. As soon as this is done and approved, we can start drafting the next bit.

DC explains voting procedure.

The Student Mental Health Agreement has passed unanimously.

5) Policy Proposals

a. Right to Congregate Act (and amendments)

DC explains that this bill has two amendments and invites Anna to introduce the bill

Anna: Thanks to Benn and friends for helping me with the process of drafting this policy. Focused on the narrative of the new normal. Even if everything is totally open in Glasgow, the Uni and Union might be a bit anxious to open and stop societies meeting – this is important as international rep as it's important for international students to meet and make friends. When Glasgow opens, we need to make sure that clubs and societies can meet within campus. There was some confusion with the actions being taken – this thought they could meet under phase 3. This is not the case, don't want anything to break the restrictions. 2nd amendment adds clarification. Am definitely not encouraging people to break lockdown rules.

DC welcomes questions.

DC moves to discussing amendment 1.

Ru: Thanks to Anna for putting this bill forward – important to affirm that we're committed to clubs and socs. It is unclear of what other restrictions might be. The risks might outweigh the benefits so this puts the students union in less of a tricky situation.

Opens to questions.

Kayla: I think this is really important – I also came to Glasgow not knowing people and clubs and societies shaped my journey. Totally behind supporting societies running. They form the support networks for students. There are some really tricky circumstances – uni really tricky to manage, and it might not be safe to host events. We don't want to be overly strict but we need to impose what we have to that keeps people safe.

Anna: Want to clarify – not against amendment as a whole. The only language that I want to keep is the no heavier restrictions in phase 4. This is the ‘new normal’ – other community spaces are going to be open so clubs and socs being able to keep it under our roof will be better. Not opposed but the important part is the language in the second amendment. The proposed change in amendment 2 allows for things like local restrictions.

Liam: The original wording doesn’t say what phase, it hints into reaching phase 4. This is the final stage and when virus is no longer a considerable threat. Whilst talking about mental health, throughout lockdown, seen mental health issues rise significantly. And we’ve also seen people can’t afford digital assets. It’s important to be cautious but don’t want to be too cautious. Would Strath Union provide support for students who can’t access online events? What the proposal is saying, once everything is in line to keep people safe, then we can open the Union and not dragging it out further.

DC notes time keeping and invites people who wish to speak to put their name in the chat – will close the list of speakers shortly.

Eilidh: Would look at what we’ve done in sport, looking at activities specifically. Making sure activity is well informed. By using flexible language accounts for taking on board more than government guidance.

Chelbi: Agree with Anna, this is really useful and have seen planning with Eilidh. I can’t see why the Union wouldn’t be open but understand concerns. A lot of students are moving in now and there’s not much on campus. Touch on digital exclusion – the university have received funding from SFC which will get laptops and will be given out based on SIMD 20 and other categories.

DC speaking list closed now.

Benn: I see the merit of both amendments and understand the concern about language. I feel that amendment 2 clarifies that it would be phase 4. If we’re in a situation in phase 4 where the building is not secure – it says that meetings are still justifiable. The union could still says things like smaller meeting rooms aren’t available but if say a larger room is open for a film night. There may still be guidelines and there will probably not be a return to massive meetings. The language is flexible and the Union isn’t as stuck as we think we might be. Agree with a lot of the points about mental health as well. Sooner we can get back to safe and inclusive behaviour the better. Best of both worlds would be the mixture of the two but in favour of amendment 2.

Rachel: Agree with Benn – could probably squidge the two together. Having listened to the conversation, both amendments want the same thing. My first point would be echo concerns about ventilation, as the building is old. Accessibility – a big concern for me, need to look out for most vulnerable students. Have to think about online and digital exclusion – recognise digital poverty is big issue and NUS Scotland are also working on it.

DC invites Ru to sum up the amendment

Ru: Generally, all in agreement with comments.

Anna: Disagree with the idea that students will be pushed out into Glasgow, instead of keeping people safe. Not conducive for international students.

Anna and Ru discuss whether they could submit a new amendment replacing their original amendments. DC proposes access break whilst Anna and Ru discuss this.

New amendment tabled to merge the previously submitted amendments. DC asked Parliament to approve whether or not this amendment should be submitted, and Parliament members agree.

DC holds a vote to decide whether this new Current vote to decide whether the new amendment (Amendment 3) will be incorporated into the proposal.

Vote on Amendment 3 to The Right to Congregate Act 2020

Approve **92%**

Against **8%**

Amendment 3 is now incorporated into the original policy proposal

DC Welcomes comments. Notes that both Ru and Anna are happy with the outcome regarding the amendment.

Moves to voting on the Amended Right to Congregate Act

Vote on The Right To Congregate Act 2020 as amended

Approve **92%**

Against **8%**

This policy proposal passes

b. Student Health Act 2020

DC welcomes Benn to speak

Benn: Focuses on physical, mental, and sexual health. Mandates the Exec to go away and get research and feed back to Parliament. During elections, a student said that Benn didn't have anything about physical health, e.g. NHS clinic on campus. In order to secure something like need evidence. Happy to take questions.

Rachel: Support for this motion, particularly on sexual health stuff. Already started to put together some thoughts around this.

Chelbi: Really important, particularly around sexual health services in Glasgow, long waiting time for Sandyford centre, this is something we should offer permanently. So many services around the university who maybe can't cope so having our own one would benefit.

Sophie: This is really important for people – when we had a pop up STI clinic, it filled up immediately.

Vinny: I think this is a really good policy to pass. One year into 22+ month wait at Sandyford – with COVID it's been extended even longer. Particularly for trans and non-binary people.

Aspen: Mental health support, students may be referred to other services so this is really important.

Benn: Thanks for the contributions and please support the motion.

DC moves to a vote:

The Student Health Act 2020 passes unanimously

DC notes time and asks if attendees are happy to stay a little longer

6) Participation in Student Democracy – Discussion

DC opens discussion to all attendees.

Anna: There has been some discussion about changing the voting system back to the old way. There were limited people running for roles and fewer people not engaging. This is obviously not the right fit. There should be more participation in the elections and should not have vacancies. There should be more people at Parliament.

Benn: Provide my perspective. I liked the old system – I liked being a regular student and getting involved. It would be hypocritical to say that I am now in support of the new system. When we introduced the new system, we had only Ru turn up. A bit less adversarial and calmer, though there has still been some occasions where things have been heated. I understand that there is benefit to the representation system. Though I think there is a fewer people running in the elections because of the new system. There is a balanced view to take and shouldn't just change back.

Student (in chat): This is the first student parliament I've attended and I think continuing to livestream it and increasing publicity will help attendance because it makes it far more accessible

Rachel: Previous system was not welcoming, the previous system wasn't a positive environment. The gender balance was bad. We didn't hit quoracy when we had the old system – so couldn't even pass anything. Now there is a more representative gender balance, but there is more to do.

Student (in chat): Can I suggest a parliament etiquette guide for newcomers?

Kayla: As a female that has experienced both of these environments they have been like night and day. In this model we have much better numbers of people attending and have fostered a much more positive environment with a lot more respect shown today alone in comparison to potentially any other student parliament meeting I ever attended in the older model

Anna: I think it is worth mentioning that while we do not have BAME filed, we also have no POC in the executive/non executive.

Student (in chat): This is my first time too. Before COVID, as a commuter student it can be kind of difficult to fully get involved with this sort of thing.

Student (in chat): I do think there's an issue with reps voting on issues that they haven't campaigned on in election cycle. Obviously, there will be scenarios where that has to happen. However, there should at least be increased representation in parliament voting and that can come through various forms (open voting, more reps, potentially class/dept' reps).

Benn provides some context about the previous system before the democracy review took place.

Kayla: The systems are like night and day. The old system was very hostile – today's meeting was really nice and constructive. We've had people engage in different ways. I think the points that we don't have key positions filled, and this is a massive problem. On the flip side, already in discussions about how to ensure representation, particularly in BAME, as there are such diverse categories. Looking on how to get proper engagement in the community.

Rachel: We can't just overturn a decision that was made based on a full referendum because we don't like the model - ultimately students are turning up to this format more & feel more comfortable. We have more democratic legitimacy with this model too so there's that. I had so many students come to me last year and tell me they were too scared to attend student parliament again because they thought they'd get bullied. Also should say that we're putting more emphasis on our student forums this year and I think its starting to boost our engagement with student politics already

Benn: I think it's worth noting that a negative atmosphere can happen - and has happened - under our current model. Any student can turn up and have their say. It's the duty of the chair to ensure that the atmosphere stays calm. I get it though, previous years' Parliament have not been good.

Ru: Think it's worth saying that with regards to the BAME rep role, that's not a decision we'll make purely internally as an exec committee with no PoC on it

Anna: For the minutes, I am against lapsing the BAME Rep to further expand the representation until we can fill the positions itself.

Emily: Have done both structures – the previous system was uncomfortable and this system puts focus on us going out to do something. This adds a bit more effort to the reps and encourages students to go out and do more. Obviously it would be great to see more people getting involved.

Sophie: Been coming to parliament since 2016, so I've experienced the system. This style is a lot nicer – the old system undermined some other people's contributions by big groups being very vocal and then leaving. Considering mental health – looking at ways to ensure that meetings are not hostile. It just needs a little longer to improve. If we promoted the forums further, we could probably get more engagement that way.

Student (in chat): As my individual answer as to why more people joined today, the union is the only reason I have any idea what is going on within the Uni itself at the moment and so for me I wanted to hear what you all had to say and what you were doing. Actually hearing what you are saying and the general feel of the meeting, I am actually looking forward to coming back.

Kayla: Apologies if I didn't put this across clearly, I don't believe we can make decisions for the BAME rep/community at all as an exec that isn't a part of that community. I was more so trying to emphasise that we're recognise that this is an issue and we are really keen to improve that engagement with those communities and get more effective representation from them

Anna: Sorry to hear that people have been belittled during the old version. I think disagreements have a lot to do with the agenda, people can still come and speak on issues. I don't think that this new system has protected the community feel – just because can't vote doesn't mean that people still can't come and hassle. Mechanisms should be put in place.

Benn: We need to finalise that conduct policy.

Aspen: There was never much information about Student Parliament. I didn't find out much more about the reps and the part-time officers until I had to address specific issues. A lot of people know about the exec but there isn't much talk about the other people who are still there – it wasn't until I got to know people until I met people.

Student: The points have all been valid – need to make sure that all views are included. When there is a lower turnout at elections, we need to be more conscious of who can vote. There is alternatives – for example the class reps, external committees supported by the union. If class reps could vote, then this would be a bit more represented. Don't want to take away too much power from the exec but I do think it's a valid concern. It's not legitimate to have 13 people vote for 22,000 people, when only a small percentage voted. Unless voting is mandatory, we need a position where everyone is properly represented. As much as I appreciate the hard work exec and non-exec are doing, but I would also appreciate if we had a greater say in the outcome. Very minimum, need more points of contact for people who are eligible to vote.

Kayla: Really interesting points on class reps/clubs exec, that could be a really interesting approach!

Marc: Completely agree with Liam. More people out there who have been elected e.g. class reps and society leader. Encouraging all of those people to participate in parliament will give it more legitimacy. I like the idea of opening it to everyone to vote, but it would be bad to have groups hijack the discussion. Maybe people could sign-up to Parliament for a year, instead of just people popping in. Would like to have a how-to Parliament guide.

Student: I agree with point around factions taking over Parliament, but many of these students haven't voted in the main election so increases the overall representation.

Benn: Giving class reps voting rights is an interesting proposal. So is Marc's idea.

Chelbi: These are all really valid points. Worth looking into.

Rachel: On the point about this system not protecting community feel, we didn't have one before this, the old system was bullying. On the code of conduct, I redrafted it a while ago following incidents, it was supposed to go to student parliament, but it didn't. I believe what was decided would be to update the code of conduct, can bring along for discussion. Agree with Aspen on pushing Non exec visibility – once we have reps, we can amend and change, if we can elect then we can change and recruit. Would argue that 12% turnout at election is better than 30 people turning up and voting – as reps, we have to make sure we're representing people and being held accountable. If everyone can vote, it will not be representative. I'm not saying we should go back to the old system – I agree that it's not a perfect system and about what reps we can bring forward. It's not a perfect system, and it's not going to be, but we can keep improving. A lot of work went into rejigging the system, which was about 3 years of work – we found that we can only try out different things.

Marc: What I also meant to say was that when Parliament is on campus again I think it would be good to come up with ways to have it possible to attend online as well. This might encourage more students to participate regardless of system. Would be easier access, less intimidating, etc.

DC would like to table again and get more people to get involved outside of Parliament. The talk about bullying is very serious and there should be etiquette in place.

Chelbi: We can set up a forum about this – definitely do.

Student (in chat): Not just less intimidating, but also could allow students to attend that want to but would usually miss out due to other issues. For example, I've not been able to attend due to a limit of travel and such. Would have loved to have voted on some of the issues.

DC thanks everybody for attending, including the students, brings meeting to a close.