Minutes of the Meeting of the Trustee Board

Date 6 July 2026

Time: 14.00pm– 17.00pm

Location: The Greenhouse, Devonshire House, Exeter, and Microsoft Teams

Membership:
Sebastian Racisz – President and Chair of the Board
Katy Willis – External Trustee and Deputy Chair of the Board
Kira Brookes (KB) – Officer Trustee/ Student Living Officer and Vice Chair of the Board
Margaret Laithwaite (ML) – External Trustee
Sophie Elliott – External Trustee
Rose Arhin (RA) –Communities and Equality Officer
Francis Steptoe (FS) - Education Officer
Gemma Veal (GV)- Societies and Employability Officer
Edward O'Sullivan (EOS) – Student Trustee
Dhruv Chadda (DC) –Student Trustee
Marco Agolzer (MAg) –Student Trustee
Cordelia Thompson (CT) –Student Trustee
Kitty Vega (KV)– External Trustee

Apologies:
George Carter – incoming Student Trustee
Harriet Jones – External Trustee
Mia Alexander (MA) –Student Trustee

In Attendance:
Ali Chambers (AC) – CEO
Cindy Porter (CP) – Head of Finance
Tom Barrass (TB) – Head of Student Engagement
Cassie Fewings (CF) – Head of Marketing and Brand
Lizzie Bowtell (LB) – Head of Organisational Development
Amy Holden (AH) – Insights and Influence Senior Manager
Dani Alexander (DA) – Leadership and Governance Manager, Board Clerk / Minute taker
Edie Ruston – Officer Trustee and Student Life and Communities Officer (incoming Trustee Board Chair)
Mia Taylor-Seal – Officer Trustee and Education and Employability Officer
Moybul Ali – incoming Student Trustee
Mohammad Hussain Mahdi – incoming Student Trustee
Moyo Adenuga – incoming Student Trustee
Freddy Wootton – incoming Student Trustee
Dylan Brown – incoming Student Trustee

STANDING ITEMS

1. **Chair's Welcome**
   The Chair opened the meeting, and welcome new trustees to the meeting.

2. **Apologies for absence**
   Apologies were received from Harriet Jones, George Carter and Mia Alexander.

3. **Notification of Any Other Business**
   KV raised a notification of any other business to discuss the University's announcement regarding proposed staffing changes, and the Guild's response.

   FS raised a notification of any other business to discuss the Responsible Futures sustainability audit, and considerations for the Board.

4. **Notification of Any New Conflicts of Interest**
   There were no notification of any new conflicts of interest.

5. **Notification of Any Conflicts for this meeting**
   Guild Officers raised their conflict with the agenda item 'Pay and Cost of Living'. Officer noted they would note vote in this agenda item.

6. **Minutes from the last minute and action log**
   The Board noted and approved the minutes and action log from the previous meeting.

BUSINESS ITEMS

7. **Impact Report (To note)**
   CF presented the annual Impact Report.

   The Board received an overview of the Guild's annual Impact Report, highlighting increased student engagement, the outcomes of the representation review, and the development of a new approach to measuring and communicating the Guild's social impact.

   The Board noted that student engagement had increased from 57% to 61% over the past year, with 19,187 students participating in Guild activities recorded through Guild Life. It was further noted that the Guild's student engagement KPI would continue to focus not only on increasing participation but also on improving the diversity of engagement across the student population.

The Board heard that the representation review had concluded, resulting in an updated representation model with an increased number of student trustees and new measures to monitor both participation and diversity of representation. The report also includes more detailed demographic data to better understand the reach and inclusivity of Guild activity.

The Board noted the introduction of a social impact measurement framework, using student stories to demonstrate the Guild's contribution to students' university experience. Reported outcomes included increased confidence, belonging and leadership, with 94% of volunteers expressing pride in their involvement.

The Board received updates on officer-led campaigns addressing period-related challenges, employability, gender safety and improved food provision for Afro-Caribbean students, all of which had been developed in response to student feedback. The Board also noted that the Sustainable Futures work remains an area for further development.

In discussion, Trustees asked whether the Impact Report would be presented to the University. It was confirmed that there are plans to share the report with relevant University committees and stakeholders, as well as with students, to demonstrate the Guild's impact and priorities.

The Board noted the Guild's priorities for the coming year, including supporting students through institutional change, delivering the first year of the new five-year strategy, continuing work on representation, belonging and organisational stability.

That the Board noted the annual Impact Report.

8. **Student Engagement Report and CEO Report (To note)**
   The Board agreed to combine consideration of the Student Engagement Report and the CEO Report to allow additional time for discussion of the University's recent announcement regarding proposed staffing changes, and the Guild's response. The reports were therefore considered together as a single agenda item.

   SR introduced the papers, and AC supported the discussion.

The Board received an update on the University's financial position, including ongoing budget reductions, voluntary redundancies and the associated impact on the Guild, including a 5% reduction in the Guild's block grant. The Board noted the Guild's work to strengthen its financial resilience and adapt its operating model in response to the changing environment.

The Board discussed how the Guild is representing and communicating student voice during the period of change. Trustees emphasised the importance of ensuring that student views continue to be heard and appropriately signposted throughout the process. It was noted that the Guild is working closely with the University to align communications where appropriate, reducing duplication and avoiding overwhelming students with multiple messages.

The Board heard an update on engagement with postgraduate research (PGR) students, including targeted communications, meetings with University leaders and ongoing dialogue with PGR representatives to raise concerns relating to supervision, teaching opportunities and the wider student experience

Trustees noted concerns raised by undergraduate students regarding uncertainty, communication gaps and the perceived impact of changes on particular academic disciplines. The Guild is also working with the University's marketing and communications teams to respond to concerns from prospective students and their families regarding the University's reputation and course provision.

The Board discussed the University's Student Protection Plan and considered the potential impact of staffing changes on the student experience. Trustees questioned current student-to-staff ratios, noting that these are already comparatively low at the University compared to other institutions.

The Board also discussed the University's longer-term financial strategy and the wider challenges facing the higher education sector.

Action: Invite Dave Stacey to attend the first Finance and Risk Committee meeting to provide an overview of the University's financial projections and underlying assumptions.

The Board received both reports.

9. **Management Accounts and Reforecast (To approve)**
CP presented the Management Accounts. The Board received the management accounts and noted the Guild's financial position. A planned year-to-date deficit was reported, reflecting the strategic use of reserves to support delivery of the

Guild's objectives. Income remains in line with budget, expenditure is slightly below budget, and reserves remain healthy, providing cover for approximately 4.9 months of operating costs.

The Board noted that some underspends were attributable to the timing of expenditure and staff welfare contingencies.

An update was provided on society finances. Trustees noted that societies collectively hold £773,000 in funds and that only 11 societies currently have negative balances, representing a significant improvement. The Board heard that work is continuing to support societies to make effective use of their funds for the benefit of members.

The Board approved the Management Accounts.

10. Guild VAT status update (To note)

CP presented the VAT Update.

The Board noted that the Guild's VAT registration process has now been completed. Trustees heard that the Business and Finance Society had been required to register separately after exceeding the VAT registration threshold.

The Board noted that the Guild will meet VAT liabilities incurred up to the point of registration, with only minimal penalties anticipated. Guidance is being finalised to support societies in understanding and meeting their VAT responsibilities.

The Board noted the VAT Update.

11. Budget (To approve)

CP presented the proposed budget assumptions for 2026–27.

The Board considered the key assumptions that will inform the development of the 2026–27 budget, including an assumed inflation rate of 5%, implementation of the Guild's new pay framework and the anticipated recovery of VAT.

The Board noted that a planned deficit is expected over the next two financial years, primarily due to fixed-term staffing commitments. Financial projections indicate a return to surplus in years three to five of the financial plan, with reserves remaining above the minimum level set out in the reserves policy throughout the planning period.

The Board approved the budget for 2026–27.

CP left the meeting

12. Break

The meeting had a break from 14.27pm – 14.40pm.

13. Organisational Development (To note)

LB presented an update on the Guild's organisational development and design programme.

The Board received an update on work to review the Guild's organisational structure to ensure it is well positioned to deliver the new strategic plan and respond to changing organisational needs.

Trustees heard that a discovery phase had identified opportunities to strengthen decision-making, planning and organisational capacity. As a result, a number of structural changes have been implemented, including the creation of new fixed-term roles focused on belonging, communications, insight and community engagement, alongside changes to senior leadership responsibilities and the integration of policy expertise within the Voice team.

The Board noted the introduction of a fixed-term Learning and Development Manager role to coordinate staff training and development. Training priorities include conflict resolution, emotional resilience, leadership development and effective communication, with programmes continuing to be shaped by staff feedback.

Trustees also received an update on improvements to internal systems and data management, including the DRIVE project, which aims to improve data quality, streamline processes and enhance the student experience. The Board noted that work is also underway to develop the Guild's approach to the ethical use of artificial intelligence, with trustees to be consulted as related policies are developed.

The Board noted the organisational development and design update.

14. Pay and Cost of Living (To approve)

LB presented the paper on the proposed one-off cost of living payment. LB noted the Finance and Risk Committee had recommended a one-off £350 cost of living payment following the proposal given to them on 24th June 2026.

The Board considered a proposal to provide a one-off £350 cost of living payment to eligible staff alongside two additional days of Christmas closure. Trustees noted that the proposal would be funded from existing underspends.

The Board also noted that the Guild had previously agreed a 1% cost of living pay increase, with the one-off payment and additional leave intended to provide further support for staff during a period of increased living costs. It was reported that UNISON supported the rationale for the proposal.

Trustees discussed the importance of recognising staff contributions while maintaining the Guild's long-term financial sustainability. The discussion also covered annual leave uptake and ongoing efforts to encourage staff to take their leave and prioritise their wellbeing.

Trustees sought clarification on the financial cost of providing the two additional Christmas closure days and agreed that, if similar proposals are brought forward in future, accompanying papers should include details of the financial implications to support informed decision-making. LB agreed to bring back the additional cost to a future meeting.

Action: Bring the financial implications for the 2 days additional leave approved.

The Board approved the one-off £350 cost of living payment, and 2 additional leave days for eligible staff and the provision of two additional Christmas closure days. Officers did not take part in this vote.

15. Organisational Identity (To approve)

CF presented the paper, seeking the Board's endorsement of the Guild's organisational identity principles.

The Board considered a proposed set of principles to guide the Guild's organisational identity, particularly in relation to freedom of speech, constructive disagreement and the Guild's role in representing a diverse student community.

Trustees discussed how the Guild can balance its legal responsibilities to protect freedom of expression with its commitment to creating a safe, welcoming and inclusive environment for all students. The proposed principles emphasise representing a wide range of student views, encouraging respectful debate and taking proportionate action where there are risks to student wellbeing.

The Board discussed how the Guild identifies and responds to contentious issues, noting that decisions are informed by student feedback, research, risk assessments and engagement with affected communities to ensure responses are evidence-based and student-centred.

Recent examples were shared, including support provided to international students during periods of protest and the management of external speaker events in accordance with legal requirements and Guild policies.

Trustees explored how the Guild's organisational identity complements the new student representation model, recognising that the two should work together to strengthen student voice and provide greater clarity about the Guild's purpose and role.

The Board noted that work is underway with an external agency to develop a proactive communications and reputation strategy to improve understanding of the Guild's role and responsibilities among students and external stakeholders.

The Board approved the proposed organisational identity principles.

16. Stakeholder Evaluation Outcomes (To note)

AH presented the paper. The Board received the outcomes of the Guild's annual stakeholder evaluation, which gathered feedback from University stakeholders on the effectiveness of the Guild's partnerships, student representation and strategic contribution.

Trustees heard that the evaluation included surveys and interviews with academic and professional services leaders across the University. The findings demonstrated improved stakeholder perceptions of the Guild's influence, collaborative approach and partnership working.

The Board noted that stakeholders identified reducing barriers to participation, supporting students through key transitions and strengthening a sense of community as priorities for improving student belonging. The Guild's strengths were recognised as its student-led communities, strategic insight and effective communication.

Trustees discussed areas for further development, including increasing the visibility of opportunities for students, strengthening support for underrepresented groups and improving coordination with University initiatives. The evaluation also highlighted opportunities to strengthen academic partnerships and student representation, particularly for postgraduate researchers and students studying within community settings.

The Board noted that stakeholders identified ongoing financial pressures, curriculum changes, employability and the increasing impact of artificial intelligence as key strategic challenges facing the University. Trustees welcomed the positive feedback on the Guild's collaborative approach and influence, while recognising the importance of continuing to strengthen stakeholder relationships and share insight to support positive outcomes for students.

The Board noted the outcomes of the annual stakeholder evaluation.

17. Byelaws Recommendations (To approve)

TB presented the paper. The Board considered proposed amendments to the Guild's bylaws to ensure they align with the recently approved Articles of Association and the Guild's new student representation model.

Trustees heard that the proposals include replacing the Guild Accountability Board with panels of Part-time Officers, with the aim of creating a more flexible and accessible approach to accountability while increasing opportunities for student participation.

The Board discussed the implications of the changes for representation and accountability, noting that although the new arrangements move away from demographic sortition, they are intended to strengthen practical representation and improve engagement with elected student leaders.

Trustees also noted that the revised bylaws provide greater clarity on how student insight, feedback and lived experience will be used to inform decision-making across the Guild. It was confirmed that the effectiveness of the new accountability arrangements will be reviewed annually to ensure they continue to meet the Guild's governance objectives.

The Board approved the proposed bylaw amendments.

18. Any Other Business

FS raised an update on the Responsible Futures sustainability audit.

The Board received an update on the Guild's participation in the Responsible Futures sustainability audit. Trustees noted that the audit requires clear evidence of senior leadership engagement and a strong policy framework demonstrating how sustainability is considered across the organisation.

The Board heard that evidencing sustainability considerations consistently across projects has presented challenges, particularly where there has been limited internal capacity and expertise.

Trustees discussed opportunities to strengthen the Guild's approach, including the potential introduction of a sustainability impact section within future Board papers to ensure environmental considerations are routinely reflected in decision-making.

It was agreed that the Board would revisit the Responsible Futures audit following the next assessment in late 2026 to consider the outcomes and any recommendations. Trustees also noted that external expertise could be commissioned in the future if additional support is required.

Action: Review the outcomes and recommendations of the next Responsible Futures sustainability audit and report back to the Board on the implications for the Guild.

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19. **Items for Information**
    - Finance and Risk Committee minutes - Noted
    - People and Governance Committee minutes - Noted
    - Governance Dates 2026-2027 - Approved
    - Guild Accountability Board meeting minutes - Noted
    - Preparing the Guild for the Future: The DRIVE Programme - Noted
    - Trustee Recruitment update - Noted
    - Strategic Risk Register - Approved
20. Trustees were asked to complete the Microsoft forms feedback form that would be circulated by email following the meeting.
21. Date of the Next Meeting is October 2026.
22. The meeting closed.

ACTION LOG

Action	Date of action	Deadline	Responsible for action	Progress and Impact
Invite Dave Stacey to attend the first Finance and Risk Committee meeting to provide an overview of the University's financial projections and underlying assumptions.	6th July 2026	October/November 2026	Ali Chambers / Dani Alexander	
Bring the financial implications for the 2 days additional leave approved.	6th July 2026	October/November 2026	Lizzie Bowtell	
Review the outcomes and recommendations of the next Responsible Futures	6th July 2026	October/November 2026	Officer team	

sustainability audit and report back to the Board on the implications for the Guild.				
Update the Stakeholder Evaluation Report to include a glossary of key terms, acronyms and organisational terminology to improve accessibility for all readers.	6th July 2026	31st July 2026	Amy Holden	