Student Council Report

Name: Karthik Kumar Bonkur
Position: President
Date of Council: 29/10/20

Please find below a summary of the 3 main projects I have been working on since taking up my role in the summer.

1. INTERNATIONAL STUDENT SUPPORT

**Background:**
- **Financial Support during Crisis**
  This pandemic worsened the global scenario. Financially, one or the other way the world is suffering. Despite the unfortunate circumstances, students are prioritising education and travelling abroad to pursue higher education. It is very essential that our University supports the students in every way possible, especially in such difficult times, I recommended going beyond the ways possible to ease the difficulties at least to some extent. I spent a lot of this term time lobbying Quintin and other senior staff in the University to offer support in the best interests of students addressing several requests and queries I receive day to day.

- **Improvising Language skills with Language workshops**
  Working on this initiative of supporting International students, one of the main concerns is enabling students to learn and develop their language skills. I consider communication as an important factor in uplifting the confidence of every student as it helps them build a bridge without any barriers. Keeping this in the view, I intend to start these workshops virtually to reduce the hassle created due to unfortunate pandemic, as it helps students participate in enrichment sessions.

**Evidence:**
The following were the esteemed members of our University with whom my virtual meetings were held, during which we discussed regarding International Student support:
- Quintin Mckellar, Vice-Chancellor
- Mairi Watson, Pro Vice- Chancellor
- Stuart Smith, International Students Director
- Maria Rosario, Head of Student Finance

**Explanation:**
During the virtual meeting with Quintin Mckellar, Vice-Chancellor, UH, I discussed regarding the issues faced by International students especially during pandemic challenge. I conveyed the feedback and concerns from the students, most of which were, Quarantine issues, Financial hardships, student security issues. In addition, I requested the aid that COVID Hardship fund could offer the students who are affected by unfortunate pandemic in the ways that they could not help themselves even to supply for their own daily needs. I brought all these concerns in an elaborative way to the notice of Quintin.
Current status – It is a work in progress and I will continue to keep lobbying in the best interests of the students.

During the virtual meeting sessions with Mairi Watson, Pro-Vice-Chancellor, UH and Stuart Smith, International Students Director, UH, I discussed the intensity of language barriers, International students face due to different learning and teaching patterns in different countries, the students face a new platform of learning and participation in the pattern of education the UK is offering and it is essential to lend a helping hand till the student gets accustomed. I explained my initiative to setup Enrichment sessions to International students focusing mainly on developing English language skills, in terms of communication, assignment assistance, writing emails. I highlighted the areas of difficulty students are facing and requested consideration of such workshops.

Current status – My objective is to introduce Language Workshops and Enrichment sessions especially focusing on the area of difficulty most of the International students face. I am lobbying with the concerned departments to arrange such workshops which engages the students as much as possible during this pandemic.

During the virtual meeting session with Maria Rosario, Head of Student Finance, informed about the struggles students are facing to clear outstanding fee debts. I explained how most of the students opt for higher education abroad by availing bank loans in their home countries, which release the funds only if the student provide passing grades after the end of their semesters, if StudyNet is blocked, they cannot access their grades as a result it escalates the financial constraints rather than aiding hassle reduction.

Current status – University co-ordinated and have taken into consideration, the feedback and concerns of the students and offered convenient payment plans to those who had 25% debt.

We, as Students’ union, are organized team of members operating in the assigned structure to address wider aspects of students’ concerns and represent their voice to the University.

2. BLACK, ASIAN, AND MINORITY ETHNIC (BAME)

Background:
I was invited to speak at the launch of the BAME Institutional Action Plan. The University have launched an Institutional action plan on Sep 10th to reduce the attainment Gap. Working to achieve progress.

Evidence:
The following were the esteemed members of our Union with whom my virtual meetings were held, during which we discussed regarding the Institutional Action Plan, and BAME Awarding Gap.
- Stephen Owen, Head of Student Services Students’ Union
- Natasha Crump, Campaigns and Policy Advisor

Explanation:
During the meeting session, the role of students’ union in contributing to achieve the targets were discussed. Institutional Action Plan was launched to reduce the BAME awarding gap by 50% by the
year 2025. To contribute to this achievement targets Students’ Union plays a vital role in BAME Empowerment Programme and Sense of Belonging. It is a hard task especially during pandemic times where social distancing and off-campus sessions are more active. Encouraging the involvement and participation is much more challenging. Despite such challenging situations working towards the goal is crucial to make the University experience wonderful to all the students equally without any differentiation as all students have right to realise their potential and there is a greater need to increase the sense of belonging. We have plans to develop a Leadership Programme, with the collaboration of Careers and WASS team to increase the participation of BAME students which enables them to participate, motivate and empower. As the President of Students’ Union, it is my privilege to be a part of such project and to do my best contribution to reduce the awarding gap by bridging the gap between academics and the students.

**Current status** – As a part of the project, I am focusing on the BAME empowerment programme, and Sense of Belonging. A significant part of my time over the last couple of months has been spent as follows:

- To gain further understanding, I have read UUK Report, Institutional Action Plan, Black Lives Matter Article.
- To expand the network, I reached out to the other Students’ union Presidents in the U.K.
- To expand the knowledge and work on possible interventions like personal tutoring strategic learning and teaching methodologies, I have read the scholarly articles focusing on the ways to reduce the attainment gap.

During this year 2020-21, HSU team has decided to focus its efforts around advocating for students success at Herts. As a part of this campaign, one of my major focus is on BAME.

3. **OFF-CAMPUS ACCOMMODATION ASSISTANCE**

Accommodation has become a greatest concern especially in the times of COVID for International students. This has mandated further assistance from the University, one of my main concerns is lobbying for greater assistance from the University with regards to the off-campus accommodation.

**Evidence:**
Virtual one-one meeting session with Quintin Mckellar, Vice-Chancellor, UH. One of the main concerns that was brought to attention was the feedback and concerns from the international students about the off-campus accommodation hurdles.

**Explanation:**
During the session, I discussed several hardships the international students are going through especially in the setting of accommodation. The strength of International students is high in the University and this has become a booming business outside. The desperate times are forcing the students to avail rental spaces that charge huge deposits with a thought of cheap rental offers. Local Landlords and private agents are charging 3-6months deposit in advance to avail a house without a Guarantor. Students are paying such deposits with much difficulty as the monthly rental is cheaper and it is easier as guarantor is not required. This is benefiting the local landlords. I
requested the Vice-Chancellor to bring this forward to the Local MP, with an intention of any circular could possibly be issued to the local landlords to curb this situation that is burdening the students.

**Current status** – Quintin Mckellar, Vice-Chancellor, UH, forwarded the concern to the local MP, in the light of benefit for the students. I will continue to lobby regarding the concerns of the students with Quintin. I am working on Off-campus accommodation issues in regards to Guarantor requirement.

Representing the voice of the students, I Prioritise safety of the students, and the campus as well. University heeds the concerns for the best interests of the students and values the feedback.

Further information about the work I do can be found here: [https://hertfordshire.su/your-say/electedofficers/president/](https://hertfordshire.su/your-say/electedofficers/president/)

And further information on Student Council can be found here: [https://hertfordshire.su/your-say/student-council/](https://hertfordshire.su/your-say/student-council/)

Thank you for reading!

Karthik Kumar Bonkur
President