

Update from the Highlands and Islands Students' Association to UHI Shetland Learning, Teaching and Research Committee – 21st February 2024

Overview

This paper and accompanying presentation aims to present latest work and developments in the Highlands and Islands Students' Association (HISA). It covers three main areas:

1. An introduction to HISA.
2. The current elections process.
3. Representation and SVRs.

1: An introduction to HISA

The [Highlands and Islands Students' Association](#) (HISA) is the membership body for all UHI students across the partnership. It provides a range of services, activities and representation to ensure equality of access to education for all UHI students, regardless of study, location or personal background. This involves us:

- working with UHI to enhance the teaching and learning experience of students,
- being the recognised representative channel between students and UHI which includes running elections for student positions and supporting those students to lead the organisation,
- promoting the interests and welfare of students,
- representing, supporting and advising individual students,
- providing social and sporting activities,
- providing forums for discussions and debate for the personal development of students.

Increasingly, with the cost of living crisis, HISA also provide pantries to offer food, clothing and basic toiletries to students in need so that they can remain in education, alongside support from APs.

Following a period of change, including the appointment of a new Chief Executive Officer and creation of a new role of Director of Student Engagement and Representation (both holders taking up post in November 2023), HISA is focussed on building effective relationships with the University and Academic Partners, meeting the needs of its students, and ensuring its strategy and operation is fit for purpose.

The focus for HISA in at least the first half of 2024 will be on our current 'Core 4' priorities:

1. Student Voice – supporting the recruitment, training, and development of [Student Voice Representatives](#) in every Academic Partner and their involvement in teaching, learning and quality committees.
2. Clubs & Societies – developing and supporting student groups both locally and regionally.
3. Board of Management – providing support for Deputies and other student members of Boards of Management to enable the student voice to be effectively heard in those meetings.
4. Exec Committee – supporting and enabling the full-time and part-time officers to achieve their manifesto objectives and plan and implement successful campaigns.

Beyond this, during 2024, HISA will be consulting on and creating a new strategy and clarifying its purpose and brand identity with students and staff. To this end, HISA is currently working on a plan to go out to all students and relevant APs in the spring to consult on a series of key questions and possibly follow up with student focus groups depending on

the outcomes of the survey. HISA will also be working to stabilise its staff appointment, retention and presence in APs where possible.

At UHI Shetland, features of our recent work include:

1. Mobilising student action on the issue of SFC funding of UHI Shetland.
2. Recruiting a student intern, Harley Green, to our staffing team, under Sara Fox our Shetland-based Development Manager for UHI Orkney and UHI Shetland.
3. Recruiting an additional student board member from among the student population.
4. Engaging with the Education Scotland Thematic Review of additional support to learners, which involved visits to UHI Shetland and UHI Argyll.
5. Campus-based activities for students to participate in, such as:
 - a. Involvement in a regional [elections quiz](#) as part of promoting our own elections.
 - b. Work as part of the [Brit Challenge](#) relating to mental health.
 - c. Promotion of our [Networks](#).
6. Supporting the creation of a quiet room for students by providing funding for furnishings.
7. An all-student meeting with members of the UHI Shetland board.
8. Contributing to the college's the campus redevelopment programme.

Alongside this, on a regional level, HISA is planning some exciting new activities this year, including launching a monthly student newsletter in February to go to all UHI students, with versioning for APs, which will include relevant current information about items such as elections or becoming an SVR, competitions, recipes, and promoting local events, clubs and societies. The newsletter will also have an EDI focus, with each edition majoring on a relevant national EDI initiative. For example, the first edition will focus on LGBTQ+ History Month which takes place in February and will promote our [LGBTQ+ student network](#). We are also improving our engagement with the university in the development and communication of our [Student Partnership Agreement](#).

Meanwhile our independent [Advice Service](#) has recently opened its 100th case and continues to expand the range of support it can offer students, from its core focus of advocacy on appeals, complaints and disciplinary procedures to, in the near future, advice on elements of finance and accommodation.

2: Elections and democracy

Nominations close on 26th February for our [Spring elections](#), at which our Executive committee, including our Shetland Depute, are elected. We are conscious that this is of critical importance for student membership of the UHI Shetland board (and wider engagement with college decision-making, not to mention wider student life, and we are working hard with students and existing Student Voice Reps (SVRs) to promote this vacancy.

It is a huge priority that we ensure stability and continuity in our student representation, partly through a high-profile election and partly through the support provided to officers and reps by our staff team. This is also supported by our regional Board of Management project (mentioned on page 1 as part of our Core 4 activities) through which we are significantly improving our support and training to student board members across UHI and strengthening our links with Governance Professionals and the wider work of boards.

We are also looking to enhance our wider democratic participation, through use of our website, our All-Student Meetings, and building on activities in the SVR system.

3: Student Voice Representatives

Elected or selected from courses across UHI's curriculum at all levels, our [Student Voice Reps \(SVRs\)](#) are the backbone of our engagement with students and our ability to shape the quality of the learning experience in partnership with staff and governors. In partnership with UHI, we are supporting SVRs to do two core things:

1. Engaging effectively with staff at programme and curriculum level, providing evidence of students' views and experiences to contribute to enhancement.
2. Collectively building pictures of the student view of learning at Academic Partner and University level, as well as within the regional Cognate Subject Groups and Faculties.

In the short term, we are improving the focus of our SVR meetings within Academic Partners, to respond to priorities identified in quality monitoring, by students themselves, and in review activities such as those led by Education Scotland and the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education. Core to this is the use of the Reflective Questions developed by [sparqs](#) (Student Partnership in Quality Scotland, the national agency for student engagement) as part of their updated [Student Learning Experience model](#). This model itself will form a part of the Tertiary Quality Enhancement Framework which will replace existing college and university quality processes from September 2024, in which UHI and HISA's views will obviously be crucial as a tertiary institution

Moving into 2024-25, we are developing a new recruitment, training and recording system for SVRs. This includes working with Admissions teams on a pre-arrival email from HISA to new students which will showcase the SVR role and our opportunities for clubs, societies and networks, making HISA and the SVR role and purpose much more visible on the VLE Brightspace and portal MyDay, and creating a communications plan for course leadership to help them explain the SVR role to students. This work will be enabled by our new Student Engagement and Representation directorate which draws together the Development Managers, local teams, democracy activity and the HISA Advice Service. We endeavour to ensure that the SVR system in the coming academic year is well coordinated, comprehensive and constructively contributing to quality enhancement.

Allied to this, we are exploring the engagement of student voices not always effectively heard through conventional SVR activities, such as:

- Postgraduate Research students.
- Students on networked degrees.
- Apprentices.
- School-link students.

Conclusion

We are keen to learn from the committee, and indeed the wider Board and colleagues elsewhere in the partnership, to continue to ensure that our work as the students' association supports good governance and quality of learning across UHI. We look forward to regular constructive engagements with your board, staff, management and students.

Rachel Burn, CEO and
Simon Varwell, Director of Student Engagement and Representation,
Highlands and Islands Students' Association
February 2024