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11<sup>th</sup> February 2020

Dear JCRC and CSA Chairs and Presidents

**RE; Your open letter sent 10<sup>th</sup> February 2020**

We are writing on behalf of YUSU to acknowledge receipt of your open letter. We note your stated intention to open a channel of dialogue to offer constructive feedback. We are disappointed that you have chosen to communicate in this way rather than through existing channels, such as the weekly Chairs and Presidents meetings, the frequent correspondence you acknowledge you have with the YUSU staff that support the Colleges, or through any of the other formal and informal channels that exist (such as Student Life Operations Group, Liberation and Welfare committee, College Sport Meetings and other forums).

As you know, YUSU supports the College Committees, in collaboration with the University. As we have discussed previously, we recognise that there are common misunderstandings about the respective roles of the Colleges and YUSU and the nature of our relationship. We are always keen to work with students, College staff and all of the committee membership to manage expectations and to ensure that there is as much clarity as possible about our mutual roles.

We should stress that, with the exception of a small contribution towards some of the College sport costs, YUSU receives no specific additional funding for Colleges (actually Colleges are more commonly cited as a reason for YUSU (and the GSA) receiving less Union funding than many of our Russell Group peers) to prioritise the development of infrastructure around Colleges specifically.

**Governance framework**

As your letter points out you are not a society, your committees are constituted under the University's governance framework. YUSU's societies, along with our BUCS teams, volunteering networks, RAG fundraising, academic reps, liberation networks, venues and advice and support centre are, unlike Colleges, constituted in and by YUSU and as such will always be a priority focus for the Union.

These bodies, unlike the Colleges, are recognised as being organised by, funded by, and are the legal responsibility of YUSU and as such are central to our organisational objects and purpose. They rightly dominate our available staff time, charity resource, limited space and wider organisational agenda. Unlike Colleges they don't enjoy the provision of University employed staff or University managed common rooms that you do. So, in regards to ticketing, as a registered charity with modest funding arrangements, YUSU isn't in a position to write off or subsidise the banking charges and technological transaction costs we incur for

providing ticketing systems for College freshers' and event tickets. To do so would be at the expense of our ability to provide support to wider YUSU-constituted and ratified activities.

Similarly our financial systems can't prioritise the Colleges over and above our legal and constitutional commitments elsewhere. Our legal obligations to provide a clear external audit trail and meet charity reporting requirements means that we have to meet expectations that can sometimes inconvenience others, including Colleges, because the money that we act as custodian for is public money and subject to careful scrutiny.

### **Finance systems and processes**

A new system for College and student group finances was introduced at the start of Spring term following a pilot with sports clubs. The system has been established to provide a more efficient way for students to make purchases, ultimately removing the paper-based claims system that largely relied on students out-laying their own money to pay for goods and services and then having to wait to claim that money back. We are actively moving away from a system of reimbursing individual expenditure by students to a system of purchase requests which will have better authorisation control and avoid the negative impact of personal up front expenditure. We believe that the system better manages risks and adverse well-being impact for student groups and provides a stronger level of due diligence.

We acknowledge that there have been some teething issues. The transition onto the new system is part of a major programme of changes for YUSU's digital finance infrastructure and systems. Throughout we have tried to communicate openly and honestly about any issues and the steps being taken to address them. We have always encouraged feedback and open conversation to enable us to be aware of, and address any shortcomings of the system; we will continue to take that approach and hope you take the opportunity to engage with us in the same constructive manner. Unlike all of our other student groups, Colleges are the only groups who finances aren't publicly available despite it being 'students money' the Colleges use. Historically Colleges have required YUSU to manage the burden of responsibility of debts, financial advances and ostensibly to provide interest free banking service without any charge or additional University grant funding. We are concerned about the risk of doing this and the potential detriment of doing so to our ability to support clubs, societies, volunteer groups who aren't given the same levels of privacy and the benefits of the same levels of income. The complexity and scale of some of the contracts the Colleges negotiate carry considerable risk (financial and otherwise). We think an expectation that we carry much of that risk burden without due 'controls' and processes can be to the disadvantage of other YUSU ratified student groups.

### **College Sport**

Your letter talks about systematic issues without clarifying what these are. YUSU's work on College Sport, in collaboration with students and colleagues in the Colleges, stemmed from feedback from college students that wanted a more simplistic approach and a clearer structure. The three colleges involved in the pilot have introduced a single membership fee for training for any number of college clubs, some merchandise, additional sports insurance and grants for their clubs.

The pilot is under review at present. We absolutely agree with your sentiment that college sport should be inclusive to everyone and this has informed YUSU's approach throughout. The programme operates alongside the 'Get Active' offer, a university wide programme of sport and physical activity for students to participate in with no commitment required. We recognise that there is currently disparity in the cost of college sport from one college to another regardless of whether they are in the pilot or not. We feel that there needs to be consideration of how fairness and consistency is achieved by the colleges.

To be clear, YUSU has never forced a College to participate in the pilot. The opportunity was outlined to all colleges and 3 colleges chose to be part of the pilot. We would be happy to explore with those pilot members and students that play College Sport whether they wish to continue the pilot or not in the future. All students within the pilot colleges can apply for the YUSU activities access grant, something we established specifically to improve inclusivity.

We recognise that pitch and grounds issues are a frequent source of frustration, particularly when bad weather hampers play. To be clear, this is an issue on which YUSU do not own or manage the sport facilities and are not the ones who make the decisions as to whether grounds are playable or not. Developing and expanding the range and quality of facilities for sport at York has been an ongoing campaign where YUSU has encouraged College sport teams to engage and shape projects.

## **Communication**

Your letter talks about your dissatisfaction with "communication with YUSU in general" and "promises made which are not kept." It does not however qualify the specific concerns regarding YUSU and it goes on to set out how you feel disenfranchised with the wider University. You are of course entitled to ask the University to spend more time engaging with you and indeed YUSU frequently advocates for exactly that. How the University staff choose to engage with Colleges is not something YUSU can control.

In the current year we have encouraged the University to engage with College Committees directly on rent setting, strategic development, estates development and management, sustainability and more. Indeed we established a round table meeting with the VC and College Chairs in his first month here. We are unclear what requests you have made to the University to engage with you that might have been rejected and if we can help you secure movement in this regard we would like to help. We are confused though about why it should be articulated as a concern for YUSU that you do not feel you get enough time from the University.

## **Looking ahead**

In January, following on from an email from YUSU to all College committees and staff which tried to clarify what YUSU does and does not provide to Colleges, YUSU opened up discussion with the University about the Union's relationship with the Colleges, the support that we are able to provide and how we can collectively improve understanding of this. We have asked the University to consider a memorandum of understanding for the Unions (YUSU and the GSA) and the Colleges to improve understanding about roles and responsibilities and better manage expectations about respective roles. This discussion is ongoing and we will continue to ask for updates on it to be shared with College Committees.

In parallel, YUSU remains concerned about our ability to meet College Committees' expectations. Regarding the specific issues that you have raised in your letter, if the College Committees do not feel that our finance system meets your needs and remains inconvenient then we would suggest that you discuss alternative arrangements with College Managers and ask the University to consider whether it can develop a ticketing and College Committee finance and banking system that meets your needs more effectively. YUSU would be happy to explore this question with the University as part of our annual funding bid to try to ensure that you can secure the provision you want from them and our resources can be prioritised around the student groups and activities and support that exist under our constitution.

We look forward to continuing to work with you to address the needs of students.

Yours sincerely,

Samara Jones, President  
Ben Vulliamy, CEO