Hi all, it's Sam your USS Community Director here (that's S¯ª¯M, not to be confused with SamH, Sam Luau, or Sama Partnerships). Before I go into things here I want to start by clarifying that these opinions are all my own, they reflect the depth of conversation that has happened both privately and publicly, but a multitude of the wider USS staff will agree with some of these bits and disagree with others - so anything negative you feel towards this doc should be directed at me, not USS as a whole - I will use "we" in this document but that we is a 'we to the understanding of Sam - Community Director'. On that note, my DMs will be open (though I may take a moment to see the request) for any questions or responses or queries or whatever really that you feel upon reading this.

So, what is this doc, what is my goal and what is the point. I'm 21 years old and have competed myself in 2 years of NSE as well as USS (when I've been around) so I have the lived consumer experience, and one of my personal biggest gripes has always been a lack of transparency within organisations alongside the shield of PR speak. Now to say that USS post me has avoided those issues would be a flat-out lie, which leads me to the purpose here - full candid transparency from a senior member of an organisation who has just dropped a metaphorical bomb on your head (especially in Esports terms).

The elephant, to me, in both the ow-general room and the staff channels was - why the fuck was this announcement made so last minute, and how can that be deemed acceptable?

I'll start with a little bit of context. I joined USS in Spring '26, as a Caster and Community Manager (now Director 🔥), during this period Reclaimer had extraneous circumstances that forced him to take a step back from USS, anyone who has been around USS for at least the past year will know Reclaimer as John USS, he was the GUY for basically everything to do with this organisation, losing him alongside some other key staff in a very short period really shook up the structure of the USS staff system. When Summer '26 rolled around, we had a distinct lad of leadership that quite frankly forced people to do things outside their wheelhouse which is why for many of our Overwatch players Summer '26 was a bit of a mess, and why we failed to get Valorant off the ground during that split (shoutout to Neonwight and the deadlock team for redeeming us to some extent with that games launch). Heading in to this Winter tournament, the lack of leadership was still very apparent - myself and another staff member had been promoted to Staff Lead but this was under an impression of being temporary, and this led USS to a state of being an organisation of lots of people with lots of great ideas but no one to actually confirm what would be done when and what would be scrapped - disagreements led to stalemates as opposed to resolution, and that is where a lot of our communication issues arose. Onto the topic at hand - we all agree that the communication regarding the Sign-up fee was unacceptable, hence the near-month extension (a more appropriate but frankly still too short timescale). For that, I would like to apologise, not only has this caused stress, but also feels to a lot of players like a massive rug-pull, that was never the intention (if it was we'd have very peculiar goals), and I am genuinely sorry that our communication regarding this has been sub-par.

How are we going to avoid this in the future, to put it simply one of the ways we are avoiding that is me. Many of you may have noticed that moving from Spring to Summer I was involved in

a lot more of the announcements, this has only increased into Winter as I find myself deep within a leadership position, and I will not allow our organisation to perpetuate this mistake on a repeated basis. Another key change is regarding the development of USS on a official scale, behind the scenes we have set-up documents regarding our status as an organisation - within these documents are legal protocols that will aid in the prevention of within-staff miscommunication and also proactivity in our external communications.

But why do we need this sign-up fee in the first place (and why the model, and why only overwatch)?

As most of you are aware, in the history of UK Uni esports there have been 2 big players, NUEL and NSE - both of these organisations were ran with individuals on full time salaries, ultimately NUEL was not sustainable enough to survive (rip), and NSE can afford to do this due to a partnership with BUCS and notably the Saudi Esports Federation backed British Esports. USS has been for its lifespan run entirely by volunteers - often times dipping into their own bank accounts to allow for USS to run, this was (I hope for obvious reasons) an unsustainable model for an organisation that was only increasing in scope and size. So, we had a few options to go with, and as pointed out by a member, it is very very rare in Esports to see a competition pay-walled - beyond that, it is extremely rare to see ANYTHING in Esports be pay-walled (think of any other sport where you can access every single broadcasted game for free and you also don't have to pay a penny to play in organised competition). A massive reason why Saudi investment has been deemed necessary by many in Esports is because of this free-to-everything model, now as a consumer I would obviously not want this to change - and that is why we aimed to keep our Sign-up fee as cheap as possible while still providing the impact needed.

This Sign-up fee, therefore, allows us to cover essential infrastructure costs such as verification and website upkeep, while also covering minimum payments for the development of the website - as well as the weekly broadcasts brought to each game. A dedicated cut of the money will also be going back to the community as a prize pool, alongside this flat minimum - any leftover money not spent after staffing and infrastructure payments will go into the prize pool as well. The USS organisation will see no profit from these Sign-ups.

There has been a notable point regarding a monetary aspect raising the expectations of how USS runs. I can assure you that we have taken this on board, and my personal expectations of how we run are higher than ever. When money is involved, this becomes a product - and I (and others) am dedicated to providing a good product that is worth the cost.

There were a few questions regarding invoices, I will clarify here that it is the burden of USS to provide you with an invoice, if you receive no invoice that is our mistake and you will still be able to play. We will calculate the cost of this fee per university, and of course if you believe it to be incorrect you are well within your right to raise that.

So why this model, the model itself was decided with the intention to be spread across as many

USS games as possible, hence the minimum team pricing (a single team uni is much more likely to have more teams if they play more games too). As to why this wasn't adjusted when we switched to just having the fee for Overwatch, quite frankly comes down to budgeting calculations - on a candid level, I hold the opinion that even in the worst case scenario financially, of a team of 5 players having to cover each of their costs out of personal pocket, £4 for ~2 months of competition is affordable, with that in mind we saw that the potential cost of lowering it within our budget calculations was not worth the minimal shift that a worst case scenario player will have to spend on. Additionally, there are questions as to why this model favours unis who are able to field more teams, and my candid answer to this is that we want to encourage more teams to sign-up, we want to encourage societies to try and expand their player pool as much as possible and we want to encourage societies to sign-up for our tournament - if it is per person cheaper to do so with more teams, then that is a financial incentive that aids both us, and our consumers (we get more money to guarantee no out of staff pocket payments, it is per person cheaper for the consumer). With that being said, as I mentioned previously, USS has been rife with ideas behind the scenes and rife with model disagreements, due to this and also due to the player feedback importance, the sign-up fee model is constantly being evaluated as we look to make it again the best value for the consumer while still providing us with what we need (and want regarding offering a nice prize pool for players).

Just a little note here of me saying I have noticed my own tone shift to be a bit more org representative and a bit more PR speaky, just thought this was an interesting shift in my writing style as things got more contentious and controversial (I do a Psych degree this sort of thing is of interest to me).

Furthermore, we are looking into setting up a NOTAFLOF fund in a more official capacity, but our current policy at the moment resides on - if this is genuinely unaffordable for a society they can reach out to us and we can come to an agreement on aiding them with the fee. This will be a discussion of course, and I just would feel quite bummed if people abuse this, but something I've repeated to a lot of fellow staff in the wake of the initial outcome is how positive surprised I was by how mature the discussion has been, it has genuinely been so helpful to see all sides communicate in a really open manner. I hope that maturity extends to our ability to aid people with fees where needed.

Lastly (I think), why only Overwatch?

As I mentioned previously, we were intending to have Sign-up fees across as many of our titles as possible. Rocket League had to be immediately vetoed due to Epic Games/Psyonix policy, so that leaves Deadlock, Overwatch, and Valorant. Regarding Deadlock, we as far as I'm aware, are the premier option (if not the only option) for Uni Deadlock in the UK and Ireland, the game is very very new and still extremely developmental both gameplay-wise and community-wise, we felt as a combination of the developing factor and our poor communication it would be a massive hindrance to the growth of Deadlock as a Uni Esport to have a Sign-up fee in its inaugural term-time split. The second factor here is the communication one, as you may have

seen, certain overwatch players in USS have been discussing the sign-up fee from the perspective of knowing it was coming (to some extent), so our limited communication had expanded to some players within our Overwatch section - this cannot be said for any of the other sections, so what felt and in many ways was last minute for Overwatch but deemed necessary for budgeting reasons, would've been considerable worse and quite literally uncommunicated to Deadlock players until the day it was announced. The same here can be said for Valorant, further exacerbated by the fact that this is our full-on inaugural Valorant split, and the majority of our Val community was not even in the server when the initial discussions started. We, I, knew that there would be backlash regarding this - the realisation of communication issues regarding the Sign-up fee (ironically) came very late on (hence there being not much to salvage communication-wise), but our Overwatch section is our most established, and again quite candidly, I believed (and still believe) would be the most understanding the least likely to completely blow-up with the announcement of this fee - this in conjunction with the fact that if anyone in our community was to be aware of the fee it would be our Overwatch players, is why this fee at the moment is only for our Overwatch tournament. It also is our biggest and thus most expensive section, so the essential fees covered by the Sign-up cost do impact Overwatch the most (things like website infrastructure of course benefit the other sections by proxy).

Effectively, Rocket League was always a no-go, Deadlock and Valorant are still very much in growth stage and also would genuinely have ZERO way of knowing prior, Overwatch for us is well established and also had at least some level of prior knowledge, so we bit the bullet.

I've yapped on long enough, I hope I haven't missed anything but if you've read all of this and have some thoughts then please let me know, feel free to discuss in ow-general or in my dms or wherever.

I really do genuinely appreciate the discussion and accountability forced out here, USS matters a lot to me and I want to give you guys a great tournament, and I know my fellow staff feel the same.

Sam - USS Community Director.

Addition in grey: I saw some talk about sponsors I forgot to mention here, sponsors are hard to get and we have been trying to source them all summer, but as mentioned earlier - any additional money we do get beyond our necessary budgeting fees for infrastructure and staffing will go towards prize pools (and having bigger prize pools from a sign-up fee is more likely to attract sponsors). We'd LOVE to have sponsors help with funding 😊!