Graduate Union
Minutes of a Meeting of the Student Council

Held at 7pm on 05 December 2016, in the CUSU/GU Lounge at 17 Mill Lane

Voting members of Council present:

Representing the Affiliated Common Rooms:

- Tobias Roeder (Clare MCR)
- Susanna O’Brien (Emmanuel MCR)
- Ettie Unwin (Jesus MCR)
- Maria Iossifidou (King’s MCR)
- Zoe Ye (Murray Edwards MCR)
- Rachel Crosby (Newnham MCR)
- Craig Burns (Pembroke GP)
- Leonardo Paoli (Peterhouse MCR)
- Ivanna Didur (Robinson MCR)
- Sebastian Wrobel (Wolfson MCR)

Representing CUSU:

- Amatey Doku (CUSU President)

Voting members of Council present by proxy:

Representing the Affiliated Common Rooms:

- Millie Papworth (Fitzwilliam MCR)

Non-voting members of Council present:

- Chad Allen (President)
- Sophie Buck (Welfare & Rights Officer)
- Katharina Greve (Communications Officer)
- Zoe Ye (Welfare Officer)
Other GU Members in attendance:

- Ellie Chan (Vice-President-elect)
- Fritz Hiesmeyr (King’s)
- Chris Galpin (King’s)
- Mark Driver (Robinson)
- Audrey Sebatindira (CUSU Women’s Officer)

Also in attendance:

- Rob Richardson (GU Manager – acting as Secretary)

The Council appointed the President to Chair the meeting.

There were 12 voting members of Council (or their proxies) present, so the meeting was quorate.

Meeting opened at 19.02

1. Approval of the minutes of the previous Council meeting

The minutes of the Council held on 22 September 2016 were approved.

2. Matters arising from the minutes of the previous Council meeting

a) Update on affiliation fees

The President reported that in Easter term, GU Council had voted to support a proposed joint model comprising a levy paid directly by the colleges and a small discretionary affiliation fee from the J/MCRs. The Joint Advisory Committee (JAC; which includes representatives of the Bursar’s committee) recommended the proposal be taken to CUSU Council, which endorsed the new model this term. The JAC will receive the proposal again in Lent Term, and depending on progress made, there is a possibility that the new model may be introduced for the 17-18 academic year. This year’s affiliation fees will be as agreed at the September meeting of the GU Council.

3. Reports to Council from Sabbatical Officers and Officers of the Executive Committee

a) President’s Report

At its September meeting, GU Council voted to establish the position of Vice-President. Since then, an election had been held and Ellie Chan had been elected, to take office on January 1. She has now begun working at the GU to receive handover and induction. A new
Executive Committee was also elected, with the new part-time officers similarly taking office in January.

The President had been continuing to work on constitutional amendments, upon which feedback had been received from the University via its Council Committee for the Supervision of the Student Unions (CCSSU). Proposed amendments include constitutionally establishing the position of Vice-President with the position acting as a sabbatical trustee, as well as clearing up a small number of inconsistencies that have come to light through the constitution’s use.

The President had been holding meetings with MCR officers in conjunction with the CUSU President. Any attendees interested in taking part were asked to speak to either President after the meeting.

In Lent Term, College Councils will be asked to adopt a new sexual harassment policy that will dovetail with the new University policy. The University policy has received significant student input, and the central unions will work to brief J/MCRs ahead of college discussions next term.

The full sabbatical officer elections are schedule for Lent Term, when a new GU President will be elected. The President requested that MCRs help publicise elections, and noted that he would be available to speak to anyone who may be interested to discuss the role.

An aim for next term is to pursue feeding greater representation into the GU through non-MCR channels, for example, from the clinical schools and the Gates Scholars. Initial discussions with the Gates Scholars had been fruitful and further meetings are planned for next term.

The President had met with Clare MCR, and was keen to help MCRs encountering similar issues in running their bars that stem from the increasingly strict requirements placed on colleges by the City Council.

The next Council meeting is likely to see an updated iteration of constitutional amendments, as well as further detail on the proposed new affiliation fee model.

b) Welfare and Rights Officer’s Report

The Welfare and Rights Officer had been holding training sessions for MCR Welfare Officers, as well as working with them to improve representation on MCRs. She had been updating stakeholders through welfare bulletins, and had held a series of welfare events. Further, she had spoken at a conference on mental health and had represented students on a number of University committees, including the alcohol working group. A key aim for next term is to continue expanding the welfare officer handbook, as well as developing a version for students in addition to the handbook for officers.
c) Vice-President-elect’s report

The Vice-President-elect had spent most of her time at the GU so far being inducted. Additionally, she had dedicated much work to updating and developing the Christmas Vacation Activity Guide; which she asked the MCRs to promote among their members, particularly with a view to finding volunteers to help run events. The Welfare & Rights Officer seconded this.

4. Motions to be ratified

There were none.

5. Council discussions and questions to Council

There were none.

6. Ordinary motions

(a) Zero Carbon

The following motion was put to the Council:

Resolved:

1. That the GU support a policy of divestment of the University’s investments, both direct and indirect, from companies whose business is wholly or substantially concerned with the extraction of fossil fuels
2. That the GU support attempts by members of the University to bring a policy of divestment from fossil fuels to a vote at Regent House

Submitted by Chris Galpin, Cambridge Zero Carbon

The proposer introduced the motion. The Zero Carbon campaign had been gathering momentum over the past year; Regent House, the University’s governing body, held a Discussion on the issue recently at which many members spoke in favour. A group of members is now calling for a Regent House ballot on divestment and this is likely to take place next term. The support of the GU would help indicate the feeling of the graduate community to voting members; CUSU Council supported a similar motion last year.

A member asked whether the campaign knew of the scope of the University’s current investments. The proposer reported that excluding funds held separately by the college, the University’s endowment fund is worth approx. £3b of which it is estimated that between £200m and £500m is invested in fossil fuels via Index Funds. Alternative Index funds that invest ethically are available.
Another member asked whether the Regent House ballot will affect college endowment funds. The proposer believed that it will not officially impact upon college funds although indirect effects may materialise; the President noted that the University maintains an investment fund for the colleges so there would likely be vicarious impacts through that.

A member asked whether any MCRs had strongly opposed the campaign when previously asked for their views. The proposer did not fully recall which MCRs had aligned in favour but none had recorded disagreement with him.

Speeches against the motion were invited; no members wished to make a speech.

A vote was taken: ten votes in favour; two votes against. The motion passes.

(b) Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF2)

The following motion was put to the Council:

Resolved:

1. That the Graduate Union [support/oppose] the University’s participation in TEF2.
2. That the Graduate Union review whether to support or oppose the University’s participation in future TEF assessment exercises as appropriate.

Submitted by the President

The President spoke to the motion. The wording was currently very neutral; the President had wished to avoid a stance being established by default.

The briefing paper outlines how the proposed phase 2 of the TEF will work. The framework is designed to replicate the Research Excellence Framework in an attempt to assess quality of teaching, with a primary outcome being that some universities will be permitted to raise tuition fees in line with inflation. Where the REF financially incentivises well resourced and high impact researchers, TEF incentivises those that teach undergraduates; a concern the President has is for early career researchers who may have supervisors that lack a clear similar incentive to support them. Another concern relating to graduate students is that universities unable to increase fees will need to source the money elsewhere; this could well come from postgraduate students. A common criticism in response to the TEF has been that the metrics are far from what many believe reflect teaching quality; it is likely that universities will look to steer TEF towards more advanced metrics.

The President asked whether any members wished to amend the motion. A member proposed an amendment such that the motion support the University of Cambridge’s participation in the TEF; it is likely that the University will be unable to shy away from it altogether. Key performance indicators that look at teaching should not be dismissed and should incentivise prioritising the conveying of information and knowledge to students. The University’s involvement in shaping how the TEF works could also present a significant opportunity.
Another member spoke against the proposed amendment, and in favour of opposing participation in the TEF. Not participating would communicate that Cambridge lacks confidence in the way the TEF is being run. CUSU Council expressed this view; Cambridge has an international reputation for excellent teaching and if Cambridge takes the step to oppose the TEF then it may be that other Universities follow and force the government into addressing their concerns.

Another member spoke to oppose participation in the TEF. The University should certainly be incentivised to support excellent teaching, but it should be a priority to put forward alternative ways of assessing teaching. The current method asks final year students to assess teaching while in the knowledge that it is likely to raise fees for the next cohort. The National Student Survey is a primary metric in TEF; student satisfaction is not necessarily linked to quality of teaching.

A member asked whether TEF2 is likely to affect the colleges or if it is just a measure relating to the University. The President noted it will measure the University, but will also be broken down by protected characteristics, which may impact more upon certain colleges than others. There is potential for the next round of TEF (in four years’ time) to expand and begin to differentiate between subjects- but it is unlikely to focus on college level provision.

A member noted that it appears clear that an impact of the TEF will be to discourage those from poorer backgrounds from attending universities that are able to charge undergraduate tuition fees of above £9,000.

A member asked whether there would be implications for student loans. The President noted that he believed the tuition fee loan available would rise in line with fees where needed but there were no plans were in existence to change maintenance support.

Another question was raised as to the influence the University may have on the make-up of TEF. The President felt it was difficult to answer factually; it was something of a judgement call as to whether it would be more effective to generate press headlines or for academics to lobby through more regular communication. A further member asked whether the University would still be able to influence the TEF if it didn’t participate. The President felt it unlikely that the University’s influence would carry such weight, but noted that the University would still be able to contribute via its usual engagement with the government and through responses to government consultations.

A member felt that the TEF seemed to be being rushed through very quickly. It appears that little modelling of outcomes has been carried out, including whether students would act upon the link between feedback and fee increases.

The President noted that the GU could take the view that TEF does not yet affect graduates so should not take a stance. A member felt that it would be difficult to stand back and expect undergraduates to fight the issue, to then call for support when TEF did begin to affect graduate students. A more holistic view of higher education could be taken.

A vote on the proposal to amend the motion by deleting “[support/]” was held: all in favour; none against. The amendment passes.
A vote on the motion was taken: all in favour; none against.

7. Emergency motions

There were none.

8. Elections by Council

The President had been Chairing GU Council, but formally the constitution requires Council to appoint a Chair from among its members. He invited expressions of interest via e-mail following the meeting.

9. Dates of upcoming meetings

The dates of upcoming meetings of GU Council are as follows:

- **Lent Term:**
  - Monday 30 January 2017
  - Monday 20 March 2017
- **Easter Term:**
  - Monday 8 May 2017
  - Monday 12 June 2017
- **Long vacation:**
  - Monday 10 July 2017
  - Monday 4 September 2017
- **Michaelmas Term:**
  - Monday 16 October
  - Monday 4 December 2017

All at 7pm in the GU Lounge

10. Any Other Business

The President noted that Council must approve the holding of an election before a ballot can be opened. Voting in the Lent Term elections is scheduled to open on 7 March. A full electoral scheme will be presented at the next meeting but in the unlikely event that meeting is inquorate, the GU would be unable to hold an election without a vote of Council.

A vote on holding the proposed election was taken: all in favour; none against.

Meeting closed at 19:51.