



Graduate Union Minutes of a Meeting of the Student Council

Held at 7pm on 08 May 2017, in the CUSU/GU Lounge at 17 Mill Lane

Voting members of Council present:

Representing the Affiliated Common Rooms:

- Tobias Roeder (Clare MCR)
- Tom Chudley (Downing MCR)
- Hugo Larose (Gonville & Caius MCR)
- Ettie Unwin (Jesus MCR)
- Rachel Crosby (Newnham MCR)
- Leonardo Paolo (Peterhouse MCR)
- Mark Driver (Robinson MCR)
- Parker Lawson (Selwyn MCR)
- Aila Bicer (St. Catharine's MCR)
- Sofia Taylor (Trinity BA Society)
- Sebastian Wrobel (Wolfson College Students' Association)

Representing the Faculties:

Voting members of Council present by proxy:

- Nigel Burke (Christ's MCR)

Representing the Affiliated Common Rooms:

Representing CUSU:

- Amatey Doku (CUSU President)

Non-voting members of Council present:

- Chad Allen (President)
- Ellie Chan (Vice-President)

- Sophie Buck (CUSU-GU Welfare & Rights Officer)

Other GU Members in attendance:

- Lucy Cunningham (Gonville and Caius College)
- Ben Alexander-Dann (King's College)
- Ivanna Didur (Robinson College)

Also in attendance:

- Rob Richardson (GU Manager – acting as Secretary)
- Kerri Gardiner (Head of Graduate Student Administration- for item 5)

The Council appointed the President to Chair the meeting.

The Council confirmed that the proxies of voting members of the Council count towards quorum.

There were 13 voting members of Council (or their proxies) present, so the meeting was quorate.

Meeting opened at 19.03

Item 5 was taken first.

1. Approval of the minutes of the previous Council meeting

The minutes of the Council meeting held on 30 March 2017 were approved.

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

a) President By-election

The President reminded Council that nominations were open, and would close at noon the following day. The campaigning period would begin on Friday 12th May, and the President asked MCRs to help ensure that information about the election trickles down to their students.

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

The President had been working on how the GU could support groups of students who act similarly to MCRs, and had spoken to representatives of the Gates Scholars to this end. Council felt it appropriate to invite representatives from this, and other groups if they were identified, to Council as non-voting members.

The President had participated in a full Review of the Career's Service, and an outcome of the review had been that the Service was not currently well-equipped to support postgraduate taught

students or part-time students. He had also been to a University Council strategic away day which focussed heavily on the North West Cambridge development, as well as a review of the membership of the Regent House.

The Higher Education and Research Act 2017 was now law, representing a fundamental shake-up of higher education. The President recommended members read WonkHE for a summary of developments. The clearest change brought in by the Act was that there would be a new regulator, the Office for Students, with funding decisions managed by a new separate body. It was also planned that the Teaching Excellence Framework (TEF), discussed previously by the Council, would be extended to cover taught postgraduate students in the coming years.

The response rate to the annual surveys used to judge postgraduate experience- PTES and PRES- was much lower than usual. The President noted that these were not related to the TEF, and it was suspected that responses were down due to confusion over the NSS boycott. The President encouraged members to remind MCR members to complete PTES and PRES, as they provided useful data to the University.

The GU had received its draft accounts for the financial year 2015-16, which showed that an unplanned surplus had been realised, due largely to the office of President being vacant for the first few months of the year. By contrast, this year the GU was on course for a deficit, as part of a plan to match-fund the Vice-President trial for two years, with the University funding half of the role. Constitutionally, the Council currently has no clear role in financial matters and the President planned to facilitate oversight from members during the budgeting process. He would invite members to provide comments on the budget for 2017-18 before it was set by the Board of Trustees.

The Vice-President continued to support the work of the part-time officers, and the final of the three-minute thesis competition was taking place on 23 May at 5pm, at the Union Society Library. An event focussing on the gendered nature of academia was also planned, and further information on this would be circulated to the Council list in due course. The President noted importance of the work of the Vice-President and part-time officers as this provides the GU with its presence among graduate students.

The Welfare & Rights Officer (WARO) had been working, via her representational work on committees, on an alcohol toolkit for colleges and on intermission guidelines. She had uploaded a large number of resources to the CUSU website, including signposting to various sources of support, alongside a guide on how to support friends. This week was mental health awareness week, and the WARO and Disabled Students' Officer would be posting a blog each day on the Disabled Students' Campaign website. She had also received a number of posters from the NHS mental health crisis team, which she encouraged members to take with them for their college.

4. Motions to be ratified

There were none.

5. Council discussions and questions to Council

a) Postgraduate Open Day

The discussion on the Postgraduate Open Day was postponed until the next meeting.

b) Review of Graduate Supervision Reports, and Returning from Intermission

Kerri Gardiner, the Head of Graduate Student Administration at the Student Registry, presented a brief paper on the planned CamSIS improvement program and proposals for more effective feedback mechanisms. She noted that CamSIS had not been updated for some time, and the University wished to ensure this round of updates was as effective as possible.

The first project being undertaken related to gathering student feedback, particularly the formal reporting system by which supervisors give feedback on their students' progress. Council was asked whether students were currently aware of this system; members were largely aware, but had not generally interacted with it. A member raised an observation that it seemed many supervisors did not use the system, and others felt it likely some supervisors did not know of its existence.

Members were asked whether they had used the master's self-evaluation system; most had not. There was discussion on whether extending this system to PhD students would be useful; some members felt it could duplicate information already collected elsewhere (such as by funding bodies or colleges), but if there was coordination between processes such a system could be valuable. There was the option of linking a new process to the Cambridge Graduate Supervision Reporting System (CGSRS) to consolidate reporting mechanisms. It was noted that the frequency of completing surveys and reports appeared to vary by subject. Council was in favour of introducing a more robust system for PhD students to provide feedback, and that this would be especially useful in departments where major changes occurred for students in between years.

A member enquired as to who would receive feedback once it was submitted. The idea was to develop formal reports which would be looked at closely if supervisors indicated there were issues with a particular student. The intention was that the new system would allow the supervisor, student or college tutor to initiate a report which would be available to see instantly by the others, and responses could then be immediate. A member noted an issue they had encountered was that the current system did not allow their reports to be seen until their tutor had looked at them, which rarely happened. Other comments included the possible benefits that more specific questions to encourage students to reflect more closely would bring, as well as students having the ability to initiate feedback about their supervisor, and there being a means by which their feedback was taken on board. Another point raised concerned students in need of help, who may feel uncomfortable requesting assistance from a faceless system, or who may be put off by the fact critical feedback about a supervisor would be sent straight to that supervisor.

Usage of the current system had proven difficult to enforce. Supervisors would be encouraged to utilise the new system using a 'carrot and stick' approach; for example, a training package to encourage initial take-up and the input of the Head of Department if compliance was lacking. A

member felt that a centralised system should uphold the principle that the same expectations were held for all supervisors and students, particularly taking into account those that start at different times of year. Another point raised was that if the system was for the student to complain about their supervisor, it wouldn't work as it wouldn't be anonymous; if the feedback was to go to the Degree Committee then this may be more productive.

The next major project being undertaken related to change in circumstances, which refers to situations such as intermission, a change of supervisor, or a deadline extension. Feeling in the University was that the current form was reasonable in terms of user experience, but the back-end process could be enhanced. The process through which the form was passed between those that needed to receive it could be slow, and some students had to wait much longer than others for an outcome. The plan was to introduce deadlines after which the form would move onto the next stage of the chain automatically. A member raised a concern over whether the a person in the chain would be willing to approve a request if the previous individual hadn't.

Currently, all changes in circumstances required the same approval chain regardless of the situation and this was often inappropriate. For example, colleges needed to approve a change in the length of a student's thesis, and a supervisor had to approve a request to change supervisor; a new system would address this. There was also a long term aim to become paperless. Another area to improve was contacting students in an emergency during leave to work away; it was therefore important that requests for leave to work away could be approved swiftly. The Student Registry was interested in the University's duty of care, and the insurance that goes alongside that. Members agreed with these suggestions, and in particular, felt a swifter outcome from the process to be desirable.

The President noted that an issue brought to the GU's attention previously concerned cases where the same person in a department sometimes received these forms several times, if they filled multiple roles. This creates a conflict of interest if, for example, a supervisor is also a Head of Department.

The Head of Graduate Student Administration thanked Council for its feedback, and noted that any further comments sent would be welcome.

6. Ordinary motions

(a) Policy generation

The following motion was put to the Council:

Whereas:

1) The constitutional responsibilities of the Executive Committee include "representation and campaigning work and the implementation of Policy", but no individual or body has responsibility for the development of policy.

2) Many former responsibilities of the Executive Committee have been transferred to officer and staff positions.

Resolved:

That the Executive Committee be given the responsibility for maintaining and developing the GU's Policy, by proposing motions to Council.

Submitted by Chad Allen, GU President, and Ellie Chan, GU Vice-President

The President spoke to the motion. Currently, the GU's policy, which it uses to inform representational work, was fairly light. The Council has the ability to generate a formal body of policy which would give greater legitimacy to representatives when they are speaking on behalf of graduate students. A means of initiating policy proposals could be allowing the Executive Committee to bring policy to Council. An advantage would be a greater range of ideas being put to Council, although a disadvantage would be further material being disseminated from the 'centre' and not from the members.

The Vice-President suggested that members consider running for Executive Committee positions later in the year, when some of the current officers will reach the end of their studies and vacate their positions.

The proposed motion would mean that part-time officers elected on a particular mandate could bring their ideas forward more formally to the Council and begin to effect change in this way. If the Executive Committee was explicitly tasked with maintaining policy and ensuring such a document remained coherent, the GU's body of policy would become more productive, and this could be made available to MCRs. The proposal also offered a useful separation of powers; the Executive Committee, led by the Vice-President, could bring policy to Council to mandate the President.

In response to a query about the lapsing of policy; it was noted that policy currently did not lapse automatically after a set period of time.

A vote was taken: thirteen votes in favour; none against. The motion passes.

7. Emergency motions

There were none.

8. Elections by Council

a) Student Trustees

The President noted that the constitution required Council to appoint trustees. The Board ultimately carried legal responsibility for the GU, and had two upcoming vacancies for student trustees to serve for the next academic year. Process dictates that the Executive Committee receive applications and decide which individuals to nominate to Council, and two high quality applications had received nomination from the Executive Committee.

The nominees spoke to their applications. Ben Alexander-Dann had been on the Board for over a year and was keen to continue in the role, having learnt a significant amount about acting as a trustee during his previous term. Hugo Larose highlighted his experience as a trustee of his college, Gonville & Caius, and was interested in developing his knowledge in this area and becoming involved in the GU.

The President declared an interest, owing to the fact Ben Alexander-Dann, being a current trustee, was his employer.

The nominees left the room and a vote was taken: twelve votes in favour of each appointment; none against.

Ben Alexander-Dann and Hugo Larose were therefore elected to serve as student trustees for the 2017-18 academic year.

The President thanked the trustees-elect for their willingness to serve.

9. Dates of upcoming meetings

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

Easter Term:

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

A member asked whether the GU had a flyer outlining its key functions that could be put into welcome packs for new students. The GU would compile such material to send to MCRs.

The CUSU President spoke about the CUSU-GU Annual Return. This was the first year of the project, which comprised a survey sent to all J/MCRs affiliated to either CUSU or the GU, aiming to compile information that could be shared with other J/MCRs and used to help them in their representational work. A number of combination rooms had not yet completed the annual return, and a link would be re-circulated.

Meeting closed at 20.10

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