

Meeting 10/2023

A meeting of the **Monash Graduate Association (MGA) Executive Committee** was held from 2.30pm – 4.30pm, Tuesday 26 October 2023, in Room C1.02, Building C, Peninsula campus and by zoom.

MINUTES

The meeting was opened at 2.41pm.

1. Formal matters

1.1 Acknowledgement of country

The MGAEC acknowledged and paid respect to the people of the Kulin nations as the original and ongoing owners and custodians of this unceded land.

1.2 Attendance & Apologies

Present: Saham Hettiarachchi, Phil Kairns, Ummatul Siddique, Calvin Chow, Ying-Xian Lai, Harshita Rathi, Rachel Lee, Runali Patil and Saral Gupta.

Apologies: Maria Lammerding, Jonathan Robberts, Arathy Kurup, Grace Bennetts and Mahima Choudhary

Observer: Moha Rostand, Peninsula campus HDR student

In attendance: Jenny Reeder, Executive Officer
Zuzana Quinn, Senior Advocate
Janice Boey, Student Engagement Manager
Valentinna Mehdizadeh, Parkville and Peninsula Events Officer
Leilani Duong, Student Engagement Officer
Charlie Li, HR and Finance Manager

1.3 Consideration of the agenda

No items were added.

2. Minutes and Action sheet

2.1 Minutes of meeting 09/2023 for confirmation

It was moved:

That the minutes of MGAEC meeting September 09/2023 be confirmed.

Moved: Ummatul Siddique

Seconded: Rachel Lee

Carried.

2.2 Action sheet

Noted.

2.3 Welcome to Peninsula campus graduate students

Moha Rostand introduced himself to the committee, and was asked about potential improvements to the MGA's delivery of events on Peninsula campus. Moha informed the committee that graduate students liked the morning teas and lunches run by the MGA, explaining that they provided a great opportunity to catch up with other graduate students and share experiences. It was noted that the campus was very quiet, and students would like more opportunities to meet other HDR students.

Ummatul agreed that the weekly morning tea run by Val was very much appreciated. There was some discussion around Struan House, with the HDR students commenting that it became very noisy when graduate coursework cohorts used it. Ummatul added that she would like to see a dedicated HDR social space that was not in Struan House, which was old and not very inviting.

3. Reports – 3.00pm

3.1 President's report

The President's report was noted. Saham mentioned that for HDR students taking up fixed-term teaching roles the professional development associated with the role was not widely known. It was noted that the model was pushed through by the previous Vice-Chancellor with very little if any consultation with academics and students and was widely disliked because of all the associated problems which had been raised but ignored.

3.2 Members' reports

Members' reports were noted. Additionally, the following matters were raised:

Calvin suggested that the career support provided for international graduate students was not adequate. He informed members that he was in discussion with the university regarding this issue.

Calvin invited members who were aware of any issues affecting international graduate or undergraduate students to contact him so that he could raise the matter on behalf of MIISON at the VC-SPAF, as he had recently been elected to the position of MIISON spokesperson. It was explained that MIISON was a network of the International Student Officers from each of the five student organisations across the Victorian campuses, being the MGA, MSA Clayton, MONSU Caulfield, MONSU Peninsula and MPSU Parkville.

Rachel expressed concern that on-campus accommodation costs were increasing by 15%; a self-contained studio rental on campus was increasing from \$333 to \$380 per week. There was a general discussion about how rising accommodation costs were seriously affecting the graduate student population who were already in financial distress, as many were living below the poverty line.

3.3 Staff report

Noted.

3.4 September 2023 profit and loss report

Noted.

3.5 MGAEC meeting attendance records

Noted.

4. Business

4.1 Business arising

4.1.1a Allegations of election breaches

There had been no further official response from the university in relation to the allegations of election breaches made against the MGA by an ex-committee member, who had himself been excluded as a candidate in the 2023-24 MGAEC elections by the MGA Returning Officer due to a serious breach of the MGA Election Regulations. The MGA had subsequently provided permission to allow the university auditor to look into the conduct of the MGAEC elections and the auditor had reported directly to the MGA that they had not found any evidence to support any of the allegations made by the excluded student. The committee agreed that the evidence showed that the complaint had clearly been, as expected, frivolous, vexatious and lacking substance.

Regardless, the final quarterly payment to the MGA had not yet been released, nor had the university responded to the MGA's notification that withholding the funds was a breach of the MGA's Funding Agreement with the university. It had been suggested informally that the funds were being withheld until the MGA responded to the university's recent additional request that the MGA provide permission to the university to investigate any MGA issue at any time in the future. However, a subsequent letter from the university in relation to a variation to the Funding Agreement had rendered a response moot, given the proposed variation related to the same matter.

4.1.1b Funding Agreement variation

Negotiations for the Funding Agreement between the university and the MGA for the period 2024 to 2026 had not yet started. The university had requested that the MGA agree to a variation to extend the current Funding Agreement by one year, citing:

- the late start to the negotiations which meant negotiations were unlikely to be completed before the expiry of the current Funding Agreement which terminated in December 2024; and
- it was expected that the University Accords report would enforce changes to the relationship between universities and their student associations including the distribution of SSAF and other forms of support.

The MGAEC agreed to the one year extension on the 2020-2023 Funding Agreement. It was noted that the university had also requested an amendment to the Funding Agreement, essentially requesting the MGA to agree to give the university unfettered access to investigate any matter they chose to investigate, in relation to complaints or concerns against the MGA. As it currently stood the university required permission from the MGAEC to investigate any matter pertaining to the MGA's operations, because the MGA was an independent incorporated association. The committee discussed this matter at length.

It was pointed out that such a request relied a great deal on trusting that the university would act reasonably and in good faith in relation to exercising this power to investigate, and yet the recent experience of the MGA in dealing with the university

senior management over the allegations of election breaches had demonstrated quite clearly that the university was not acting reasonably and in good faith. The university had panicked when threatened by the complainant (that the excluded student would go to the newspapers if their demands were not met), and the university had then proceeded to bypass the MGA's and its own processes for dealing with the complaints, instead threatening the MGA with derecognition as a representative body should it not immediately comply with the demands made by the complainant to the university.

It was agreed that an amendment to the wording to ensure that the university would be required to utilise its own and the MGA's proper and established processes for dealing with any complaint in the first instance, was a reasonable request for the MGAEC to make.

4.1.2 PPA budget review subcommittee

The MGA budget review subcommittee reported back to the MGAEC in relation to their consideration of the PPA's request for additional funding. In response, there were two opposing views among MGAEC members:

- that the MGA was already spending twice the amount of SSAF on Parkville than they were receiving from that campus, and therefore Parkville was being subsidised by funding from Clayton campus. It was argued that this was unfair to Clayton students, but also unfair in relation to other small campuses such as Peninsula, which had a similar income but had half the amount of SSAF to spend per head on events for their students because they were operating within their budgeted income.
- that Parkville students had fewer amenities on their campus than the larger campuses and should therefore be allocated more to spend on events.

After a lengthy discussion where the committee was split on whether or not additional funding should be allocated, it was agreed to put a motion to decide the matter.

It was moved:

That the MGAEC approve up to \$5000 in additional funds to the PPA for the remainder of 2023.

Moved: Saham Hettiarachchi
Carried.

4.1.3 PTV campaign update

Held over.

4.2 General Business

4.2.1 Grad Groups report

Noted.

4.2.2 Debit card for HR & Finances Manager

The committee noted that Charlie Li had recently been appointed to the position of HR and Finance Manager, and required access to an MGA debit card.

It was moved:

That an additional MGA staff position be a holder of an MGA Debit card linked to MGA bank account as follows:

Position	Current Incumbent	Type
HR and Finance Manager	Cheng Li	Staff

Moved: Saral Gupta
 Seconded: Ummatul Siddique
 Carried.

4.2.3 MGA Volunteer and Leadership Program

The committee discussed the Volunteer and Leadership program report and proposal for redevelopment. A number of members commented on how much graduate students valued the program and found it critical to helping them settle in to the university, make friends and set up social networks. The idea of a formal leadership program with rewards appealed to members. In general, the proposed direction of the program was well supported and the committee thanked the events team for their work in this area.

4.2.4 MGA mission statement

Saham asked for expressions of interest in forming a subcommittee to work on developing a mission statement for the MGA. Jonathan, Rachel, Ummatul, Calvin, Harshita and Evelyn expressed interest.

4.2.5 Other business

A number of matters were raised at the conclusion of the formal business:

- Janice thanked Leilani Duong and Casey Chen for their amazing work on developing the Volunteer and Leadership Program and the Graduate Group Program, respectively.
- Harshita and Saral raised a concern about the fact that they had been asked to step down from the LOTY panel after declaring that they had each been taught by one of the lecturers who had been nominated. Their declaration had been made after they had already put in the time and effort to read the 11 nominations, so they felt that their time had been wasted, and that it was unfair to ask them to step down. Alternative proposals such as conducting a blind review of nominations was considered unfeasible given the specificity of the information provided in the application forms, which was likely to enable reviewers to identify the nominated supervisor. The committee was advised that even if there was a perceived conflict of interest it was better to step down from the selection panel as there was no point in risking introducing any suspicion of bias into the process. Members were reminded to declare potential conflicts of interest as soon as they were aware they may exist.
- Runali queried where students could go to lodge complaints about the recently introduced fixed-term appointments being offered to HDR students. While the committee acknowledged that this was a staffing matter and therefore not within the MGA's purview, it was considered important that feedback be provided to the university given its effect on the HDR

community. Saham offered to receive feedback on the matter from HDR students so that he and Jonathan could raise it at the GRC.

- Ummatul inquired about the arrangements between the MGA and MONSU Peninsula for the joint fresh food market. Janice advised that the MGA had paid for 30 boxes which had been set aside for graduate students. Ummatul was satisfied that a good number of graduate students had benefitted from the event.

5. Membership matters

No business.

6. Next meeting

It was agreed that the next meeting would be held in November at a date and time to be confirmed by committee members.

The meeting closed at 4.40pm.