

Meeting 08/2024

A meeting of the **Monash Graduate Association (MGA) Executive Committee** was held from 2:00pm – 3:40pm, Tuesday, 24 Sept 2024, in the MGA Meeting Room, Caulfield Campus and by Zoom

MINUTES

The meeting commenced at 2:00pm.

1. Formal matters

1.1 Acknowledgement of country

The MGAEC President 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: Jonathan Robberts (Chair), Saham Hettiarachchi, Calvin Chow, Dhanya Menoth Mohan, Aakash Saraf, Troy Lau, Vu Hiep Dang (Oliver), Jacob (Jaime) Heal, Ummatul Siddique, Mohammed Salehan (Zeehan), Beauty Nalwendo, and Kritika Arora (joined 15:11).

Apologies: Neharika Shah, Mahima Choudhary, Isabel Kiryu.

In attendance: Janice Boey, Executive Officer
Charlie Li, HR & Finance Manager
Ying Xu, Advocacy Manager
Shinyi Chin, Marketing & Communications Manager
Ryan Edwards, Research Manager
Samantha (Sam) Gabriel, OHS and Facilities Officer

2. Minutes and Action sheet

2.1 Minutes of meeting 7/2024 August for confirmation

It was moved:

That the minutes of MGAEC meeting August 07/2024 be confirmed.

Moved: Calvin Chow

Seconded: Saham Hettiarachchi

Carried with no objections.

2.2 Action sheet

The action sheet was noted. Jonathan also noted that he has responded broadly to the proposed international student caps, and addressed the issue of violence and unrest taking place overseas that impact the graduate student community in the MGA newsletter.

3. **Reports**

3.1 President's report

The President's report was noted. Jonathan explained that the MGRO is moving forward with proposed changes to the Monash PhD program and thanked Calvin and Umma for participating in the University focus group consultations. Concerns raised with the University included that the MGRO may not have sufficient staff to support the proposed structural changes.

Saham commented regarding proposed stipend changes being not significant, and a need to push for graduate research faculty specific spaces.

Umma commented on the concern regarding how changes will be executed and how Monash will support PhD students who wish to learn and engage with other institutes, as this was not addressed in the consultation.

Jonathan noted the government RTP stipend minimum has increased to \$33,500, and that it is important for Monash to increase the current stipend rates to be more competitive in Go8 Universities.

Jonathan also noted that he, Troy, and Jan have met with PPA to understand how the MGA can better support the association. At the meeting, the parties agreed to in principle changes to the budget and for MGA to provide added guidance. However, resolutions are pending the details of the MGA funding agreement with the University, which is unlikely to commence until the government has made a final decision regarding international student caps.

3.2 Members' reports

Members' reports were noted.

Umma noted that Peninsula is doing well with events and that student engagement numbers have increased. Uma has been working with MGA staff to introduce new initiatives to engage graduate students at Peninsula, including a fortnightly coffee catch up.

Aakash discussed his attendance at the University's Anti-racism committee meeting, which went well and involved broad level discussions. Aakash spoke with members about other committees regarding possible other opportunities.

Saham noted that availability polls were sent out to the relevant committee members who raised their hand to participate in the engaging satellite campus and future work forces meeting action groups to start things.

Calvin commented that on the issue of RTP stipends, the current low stipend rate discourages domestic students from studying at Monash. There is also more PR and marketing needed for international HDR students to show how the local community is positively impacted.

3.3 Staff report

The staff report was noted.

Saham noted that students have requested increased transparency in how SSAF funding is used. Jan identified that the feedback comes from events, and that Events Manager Leilani may be best placed to clarify the feedback at a later date.

3.4 August 2024 profit and loss reports

The August P&L was noted.

3.5 August MGA Newsletters & Social Media Report

The Newsletters and Social Media Report was noted.

Shinyi noted that welfare type events like Grab and Go Dinners, and free lunches, and Pop-up Grocer have been very popular with students, and posts have very high share rates. The recent Zoo trip event has also seen significant popularity among students.

Aakash highlighted that MGAEC members and staff should have a more significant presence on social media.

3.6 Aug/Sep Advocacy Report

The Aug/Sep Advocacy Report was noted.

Ying noted that advocates have focused on supporting students at Academic Progress hearings in the previous weeks. There have also been continued grants under the Welfare Assistance program, however applications have reduced in recent weeks as no further advertising was conducted following the initial announcement that the full program had been reactivated. The program is now being promoted further, including on MGA screens around the campus, and at welfare events such as Pop-up Grocer and free lunches.

Calvin noted the advocacy report identified student issues and asked how it was best for MGAEC members to bring about change regarding these issues. Ying discussed that the University has regular policy review processes where the MGA is consulted, alongside committees where issues may be raised.

Calvin asked how MGAEC members can participate in APC panels. Ying explained that Research Manager Ryan Edwards currently supports faculties with finding graduate panel members for academic progress hearings, and that interested MGAEC members can contact Ryan to be included.

Calvin asked whether any issues or matters have arisen from the welfare grants, such as the Emergency Grant. Ying discussed that there have been no relevant issues that have emerged from the Welfare Assistance program so far. Grant approvals are highly dependent on individual student circumstances and what grants the student qualifies for.

Calvin recommended for there to be a new advertising round for the Welfare Assistance program which highlights that all students can apply regardless of international or domestic enrolment status.

Jonathan inquired as to whether the MGA publishes any reports on advocacy issues. Ying explained that the MGA has historically not produced regular Advocacy reports, but have in the past released one-off reports summarising multi-year data. Jonathan recommended that the MGA should look into producing regular advocacy reports which highlight systemic issues. Ying agreed and confirmed that this is currently planned.

3.7 MGAEC meeting attendance records

The MGAEC meeting attendance records were noted as true and accurate.

4. Business

4.1 Business arising

4.1.1 2024 Election Report

Jonathan highlighted two particular issues identified and the recommendations of returning officer within the Election Report. The first issue was that the MGA Election Regulations have clauses which restrict the level of campaigning that can be done by students running for positions on the MGAEC. The Returning Officer recommended that the MGA considers amending its Regulations to permit candidates to conduct promotions and distribute materials as approved by the Returning Officer, to be consistent with other Monash MSOs.

Jonathan commented that the graduate student cohort generally has a more mature demographic, who does not appreciate being campaigned to. However, the reduced campaigning can impact turnout rates, resulting in low voter participation.

Saham highlighted that past negative feedback received by Returning Officers have chiefly been around students who attempted to conduct campaign activities contrary to the MGA Regulations. There is a risk of graduate students receiving spam, and permitting the distribution of physical flyers does not align with MGA's sustainability goals. It is more equitable to allow candidates to present material to voters online - however this is already permitted as candidates can share their details. An alternative is to permit groups of people to campaign on candidates behalf.

Jonathan acknowledged that online communications is more equitable and does not advantage financially well off students who can afford to pay for printing physical materials.

Umma agreed that it's important to have an equitable approach, and emphasised that it would not be fair to allow additional advertising. Students who are popular or have large friend groups may have an advantage over those who aren't known well.

Jonathan raised the possibility of creating a forum to bring candidates together, and to give graduate students an opportunity to meet election candidates in order to overcome network limitations.

Jaime highlighted that while financial inequity is important, the MGAEC should also be conscious that candidates may have varying social capital.

Aakash emphasised that materials being available online doesn't impact equality.

Umma and Calvin highlighted that it is important to minimise the risk of graduate students feeling harassed by candidates.

Jonathan proposed to take the issue out of session, and for MGAEC members to write their recommendations around an ideal campaign process. This may include if the

MGA provides a forum that allows networking, or provides funds for printing material. The other committee members agreed to provide written suggestions.

Jonathan then highlighted the second recommendation from the Returning Officer for the MGA to release voting numbers. The MGA does not presently release voting numbers, which can cause severe doubt in integrity of results. The Returning Officer recommended amending the MGA Regulations so full notice of results will be released publicly.

Jonathan explained that the MGA currently does not publish results due to privacy considerations for students. The MGA has a firm commitment on a diverse committee makeup, and the Constitution provides that there must be a balance of students from different faculties, genders, and enrolment types. Data is not released as students may be identified based on gender, sexuality, and indigeneity, leading to a breach of privacy.

Ying highlighted that the MGA could seek consent from candidates to release result information. Those students who do not provide consent will not have results released.

Calvin suggested that the MGA could reject the recommendations and maintain current practice.

Saham asked regarding current practice. Ryan explained that in previous years, overall number of votes received have been published and successful candidates named. However, specifics are not released and the MGA has not shown how the quota has been applied. Quotas are an obligation under the Constitution which is difficult to change.

Jan encouraged MGAEC members to explain the value that raw numbers provide. Calvin highlighted that numbers can help inform campaign material for the future. Umma highlighted that seeing student votes and support will have an encouraging factor for candidates.

Jaime suggested that the MGA could release voter numbers, but remove names and only provide nominee statements, or percentages of who agreed to see who approved of statement.

Jonathan recommended that due to the substantial nature of possible changes and the risk of unintended consequences, the MGAEC will review the recommendation further. Jonathan will send out request for feedback and suggestions from MGAEC members.

4.1.2 MGA HSW Policy and Objectives

Sam highlighted that the MGA HSW policy and objectives are up for review and any feedback from the MGAEC can be directed to herself. Documents have been kept in line with Monash OHS policy, and general terminology has now changed from OHS to HSW.

4.1.3 Honoraria Payments

Saham highlighted that earlier in the year, the MGA Honoraria Regulations were drafted to govern what MGAEC members must do to receive their stipend. The Regulations were designed to better improve accountability within the MGAEC. Saham spoke to a flowchart outlining the procedure, and the use of checklists to verify that MGAEC have met their obligations.

Charlie raised that upcoming honoraria payments may need to be withheld until the MGAEC has had the chance to familiarise themselves with the procedure and have had their checklists verified. This was confirmed by Jonathan.

4.1.4 Public Affairs and Relations Framework

Jonathan shared the new Public Affairs and Relations Announcements guide, highlighting that it has been designed as an internal MGAEC process and not a binding policy. The guide was designed to help ensure that public communications from the MGAEC are accurate and aligned to the MGA's purpose, as specified within the Constitution. Jonathan spoke to the guide and the process, in that announcements will go through risk assessment, be approved by the MGAEC by majority vote, and should be made in a timely manner. Jonathan outlined the creation of the PAR Sub-Committee which will draft, review, and edit MGA statements, as well as ensure compliance, coordinate with stakeholders, assess risk, and advise the president.

Saham recommended a secondary step to ensure that risks are reassessed after receiving stakeholder feedback. This was incorporated into the process.

4.2 General Business

4.2.1 International Student Caps

Jonathan raised that the Australian Government has reopened submissions for a senate inquiry which will close on Thursday 26 September. The MGA did not make any submissions in the previous round. A draft submission has been created by Jonathan, and is deemed low risk considering the potential benefit to the graduate student community. Jonathan welcomed suggestions from MGAEC members. The submission will be sent by COB Wednesday 25 September unless contested in an out of session vote.

Calvin asked re. joint submission with MSA. Jonathan specified that due to timing and lack of time, a submission will need to be submitted alone. Will be sent out via email.

4.2.2 Graduate Coursework Student Satisfaction Report

Ryan spoke to the Report, which compares and summarises data from an annual survey of graduate students across 10 universities including Monash. The Report examined graduate student engagement and satisfaction, as well as the values important to students.

Key results arising from the report includes that Monash is performing better than other Unis in the survey in student satisfaction. In addition, the gap between importance of various issues and satisfaction is narrower. Broadly speaking, dissatisfaction with job readiness is high across all Universities, and students are

unhappy with internships, placements, networking opportunities, and preparedness for entering the workforce.

Ryan highlighted that faculty specific reports have also been created and are available on request, and an HDR report will also be prepared. The MGAEC thanked Ryan for his work.

Calvin highlighted that there appears to be higher dissatisfaction for domestic students, pointing to a need for improvement.

Ryan highlighted that online, part time students are generally less satisfied due to being less engaged with the programs.

Jonathan highlighted that lower engagement among domestic, online, and part-time cohorts with MGA is concerning as well.

Ryan highlighted that engagement for these cohorts is on par with other unis, but those MGA does engage with are satisfied with MGA's services.

4.2.3 Personal Branding Workshop

Shinyi explained that an one-hour personal branding workshop focusing on LinkedIn is currently planned, but is pending confirmation of a time best suited to MGAEC members. The staff run workshop will focus on how to have better digital presence, and allow attendees to action recommendations. An availability poll will be sent out to MGAEC to nominate a time in the following week.

One on one video recording sessions are also planned to take place on a separate day for MGAEC members. Draft questions will be sent out in advance and interested MGAEC members should prepare in advance. The videos will be part of the personal branding initiative, and allow the MGAEC member to authentically introduce themselves to the graduate student community. Topics covered will include - 'who you are', 'what you aim to do', and 'what you have done' among others.

4.2.4 Action Groups from MGAEC Retreat

The MGAEC agreed to use time following the meeting to conduct action group meetings.

5. Other business

No other business was put forward..

6. Next meeting

The next meeting will be held in October 2024 at a time and place to be confirmed by members' availability.

The meeting closed at 3:40 pm.