

Meeting 09/2020

A meeting of the **Monash Graduate Association (MGA) Executive Committee**
was held from 4.00pm – 5.30pm, Thursday 8 October 2020
by Zoom invitation.

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MINUTES

The meeting opened at 4.05pm.

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

Present

Caitlyn Neale (Chair), Stacey Coe, Julie Dao, Wendy Febrita, Damon Hu, Samuel Miles, Emily Pryor, Ailsa Webb, Elliot Anderson, Mazaya Abidin, Roby Vota, Ke Xiou Tan, Emma Kellaway

Apologies

Jessica Lu, Preeti Mehta, Aman Madaan

In attendance

Janice Boey, Jenny Reeder, Zuzana Quinn, Poi Yi, Dastan Nurmukan, Pryanka Parhi, Ahsan Shah, Hamimah, Amardeep Singh, Mrudula, Guggilla, Nishat Anan.

1.3 Consideration of the agenda

Stacey added item 4.2.6 on Academic Progress Advisory Group (APAG).

2. Minutes and Action sheet

2.1 Minutes 08/2020 for confirmation

It was moved:

That the minutes of MGAEC meeting September 08/2020 be confirmed.

Moved: Ailsa Webb

Seconded: Stacey Coe

Carried.

2.2 Action sheet

Noted.

3. Reports

3.1 President's report

The President's report was noted. Caitlyn added that the University was conducting discussions with MSOs about the communication of unit information. In general, students were unhappy about the fact that the unit guides had been discontinued and replaced by the handbook and information on moodle. The meeting with the university was to discuss the content of the replacement information provided, with any changes to be in place in preparation for the 2021 teaching period.

Stacey noted that she had informed her coursework student colleagues about the details of the work of the MGA in this area, and they had expressed their gratitude to the MGA for their action of behalf of graduate coursework students. She said this highlighted how important it was for the MGA to not only continue their good work but to ensure that all graduate students were kept informed about that work.

3.2 Members' reports

The members' reports were noted. Caitlyn inquired about the progress of MGA's sustainability week, which was currently underway. Ailsa reported that the events were going well and that those in attendance were very engaged with the topics. Ailsa, Julie and Preeti had all taken turns hosting events, along with BPD university staff working in the area of sustainability. The committee thanked Ailsa, Julie and Preeti for their work in putting together this event. Stacey commented on the high quality of the communications provided by Sandra, Jan and Maggie. Julie noted that she had received excellent feedback from both participants and BPD staff who were keen to collaborate again with MGA next year on an expanded version of the event.

Hang raised a concern that in the Arts Faculty some 12 credit units were being converted to 6 credit units in 2021, and structural changes were being made to some courses. It was not clear how widespread the changes were or if they were being applied retrospectively. Hang agreed to provide further information to Caitlyn for a more informed consideration of the matter.

Sam apologised for not submitting his written report in time for the agenda papers. He informed members that he had been busy with the GRC, the mentoring scheme was going well and he had been involved in organising the Social Sciences symposium.

3.3 Staff report

The staff activity report was noted.

3.4 September 2020 profit and loss report

The September profit and loss report was noted. It was highlighted that the MGA was tracking slightly under the extremely tight budget allocation for 2020 and may not need to access as much of the reserve as first expected. However, it was anticipated that the financial position of the MGA would be much worse in 2021 as the accumulated effects of the closed borders began to hit, keeping in mind that the MGA's budget was tied to graduate student enrolment numbers. While domestic enrolments typically increased during a recession, these numbers were unlikely to make up for the shortfall in international student enrolments, which would continue to reverberate for the next three years.

3.5 MGAEC meeting attendance records

The MGAEC meeting attendance records were noted.

4. Business

4.1 Business arising

4.1.1 Graduate Coursework forum notes

Caitlyn informed members that there was only one more Education Committee meeting for the year, and she would present the results of the coursework forum to that meeting. It was agreed that the forum report which included direct quotes from students was a good vehicle for conveying the issues and emotional impact of COVID-19 changes on the graduate coursework student community.

4.1.2 MGA Supervisor of the Year competition

Over 100 nominations had been received for the MGA Supervisor of the Year competition. On behalf of the selection panel, Emily requested some assistance from graduate research members of the committee. It was noted that the panel could also recruit members from the wider graduate research student population provided those students' supervisors had not been nominated.

4.1.3 Response re COVID concessions for HDR

Emily summarised the response from Professor Matthew Gillespie to her letter requesting further COVID-19 concessions for graduate research students. Not surprisingly, given the current financial situation of the university, requests requiring additional funding such as scholarship extensions were declined, as were automatic extensions to milestones and candidature. The university agreed to improve messaging to students especially when changes to the COVID restrictions occurred, as well as agreeing to change the regulations around the provision of proof for carers so that they were not required to produce a medical certificate. For the first time the university acknowledged that the pandemic was an exceptional circumstance, giving students confidence that applications for extensions to candidature, milestones and leave available under the current regulations, would be considered as such.

The committee discussed the response in detail and debated which matters should be pursued. It was noted that while the university was in financial distress, the recent announcement of an injection of one billion dollars to Australian universities for research could see some of that funding flowing to HDRs. Emily advised the committee that she had been asked by Professor Gillespie to channel future matters through the Graduate Research Committee (GRC). It was noted that there was only one GRC meeting remaining for the year and that this request may not be practical in terms of raising issues in a timely manner. Sam had suggested to GRC that they may need to meet over the end-of-year break due to the COVID situation but there was no agreement to this suggestion from GRC members.

Stacey thanked Emily for her outstanding work in identifying, pursuing and reporting on the many different issues that had been raised by graduate research students.

4.2 General Business

4.2.1 Report from MUPA on Malaysia campus activities

The MUPA members introduced themselves to the MGA committee. Caitlyn invited the MUPA President Nishat Anan to speak about the activities of MUPA.

Nishat reported that MUPA had had a delayed start this year due to election complications, but had managed to run a number of activities including: alumni and industry events; yoga; boot camp; journal club; mental health awareness activities; Appreciation Awards for supervisors and staff; an online video competition; and a graduate survey on the effect on graduate students of the government's movement control order. They also held weekly meetings with campus management. Given the uncertainty of on-campus events in the future, MUPA were planning for an online induction next year.

The committee members were mainly HDR students, with only one graduate coursework member. It was suggested that MUPA could request access to the graduate coursework population from the PVC(Malaysia) to enable them to establish a stronger connection with that cohort.

4.2.2 Report on MGA mentoring programs

The committee noted the report on the 2020 MGA mentoring programs, as well as the handbooks distributed to mentors for the HDR program and the Coursework program. Both programs had been very successful and appreciated by both mentor participants and mentees.

4.2.3 Free statistical service for HDR students

Students had raised concerns about their inability to access individual consultations with the statistical consulting service. All HDR students were entitled to receive 5 hours of free statistical consulting over the duration of their degrees. While this service was predominantly used by students in STEM, students in HASS also accessed the service for assistance with survey development and analysis. The service was provided by statisticians in the Science and MNHS Faculties, and funded by MGRO. It is highly valued by students.

There was evidence to suggest that MGRO intended to promote generic statistical classes at the expense of providing individual tailored sessions. The total number of hours allocated for individual sessions for 2020 was 50. To put that in perspective, the current statistical consulting office provided 50 hours of consulting over the last seven weeks. MGRO has been emailed to clarify the status of the service.

It was agreed that if the facts are confirmed by MGRO and a decision had been made to reduce the number of individual consultation hours, the MGA should object to this on behalf of HDR students.

4.2.4 Closure of Science Instrumentation Facility

Caitlyn had been contacted by a group of HDR students in Science who were concerned about the closure of the Science Instrumentation Facility. The Facility was staffed by technicians who produced and maintained specialised equipment used by students and staff in STEM disciplines. Emily investigated the issue and drafted a letter arguing against the closure of the Facility, which had been sent to senior management from Caitlyn and Emily. All MGA HDR reps had been alerted to the petition and asked to distribute it to their cohorts. Matt Gerber, the HDR student leading the campaign, was extremely grateful for the MGA's support.

4.2.5 Communicating MGAEC representational activities

The committee was asked to consider the most effective way to keep the wider graduate community up-to-date on lobbying activities and representational work undertaken by the MGA. Work was being undertaken on many fronts by MGA committee members, MGA staff, individual graduate students from the community and student representatives on university committees. These efforts were not always effectively captured and communicated to the wider graduate student community.

It was agreed that the MGA needed the ability to:

- push information out quickly to students to let them know what MGA was doing, and promote progress/outcomes. It was agreed that social media was a good vehicle for these purposes, but that information sent this way was transient.
- retain a history of the activity and a site to refer to when MGA has inquiries from students about current and past activities. It was agreed that the website was appropriate for storing information that needed to be accessed by multiple students on multiple occasions, and that the relevant pages should be reviewed and updated.
- put in place a mechanism that collated information from all MGA activities to ensure that website information remained current and comprehensive and enabled selective information to be fed out through social media. A shared central document was proposed, where MGAEC and staff could keep their own projects updated. This could either be public or its contents transferred regularly to a webpage.

4.2.6 Academic Progress Advisory Group (APAG)

Stacey informed members she had been nominated as the graduate representative for APAG. She had organised a private session with the committee administrator to request a summary of the proposed changes, copies of the communications sent to students during the process, and information about how data was being captured. It was noted that students experienced problems for some time before they arrived at the point where the policy began, so it was important to think about how to engage students in their academic progress before things went wrong, as well as the most effective way to deal with students once they reached that point.

5. Membership

No business.

- 6. Next meeting** – It was agreed that the next meeting would be held by zoom on Thursday 12 November, from 4pm – 5.30pm.

Caitlyn thanked MUPA members for attending the meeting and stated that she looked forward to working more closely with them.

The meeting closed at 5.45.