

Meeting 10/2020

A meeting of the **Monash Graduate Association (MGA) Executive Committee**
was held from 4.00pm – 5.30pm, Thursday 12 November 2020
by Zoom invitation.

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, Jessica Lu, Wendy Febrita, Hang Hu, Samuel Miles, Emily Pryor, Ailsa Webb, Elliot Anderson, Roby Vota, Ke Xiou Tan, Aman Madaan.
Apologies	Preeti Mehta (joining at 5pm), Emma Kellaway, Mazaya Abidin.
In attendance	Janice Boey, Jenny Reeder, Zuzana Quinn.

1.3 Consideration of the agenda

The following item was added: 4.2.9 SSAF projects

2. Minutes and Action sheet

2.1 Minutes 09/2020 for confirmation

It was moved:

That the minutes of MGAEC meeting October 09/2020 be confirmed.

Moved: Ailsa
Seconded: Sam
Carried.

2.2 Action sheet

Noted.

3. Reports

All written submitted reports were noted. In addition:

3.1 President's report

Caitlyn explained that the university had amended a large suite of policies and procedures relating to coursework degrees, on which the MGA had provided feedback. The MGA COVID report had been submitted to a number of university committees including VC-SPAF and Education Committee.

3.2 Members' reports

Emily reported that there had been a number of HDR issues she had been lobbying for including that the Science Faculty instrumentation facility remain open and that the number of individual consultation hours available free to HDRs be maintained rather than heavily reduced. She also noted that discussions at GRC around the MGA's request for an automatic extension of unpaid leave for all HDRs sounded positive, with GRC looking to seek permission from Academic Board to effect this. Emily had written to the GRC chair asking for more transparency around the GRCA process as well as further scholarship extensions for HDRs. An update would be posted on the HDR FaceBook page. She had also hosted a Faculty rep meeting, participated on the Supervisor of the Year award selection panel and was working with Ke Xiou on women's issues. Jess and Julie expressed interest in joining in those discussions.

Sam announced that the MGA had had some small wins at GRC but faced many roadblocks convincing ADGR members to speak out about issues of concern. The MGA had raised a concern about the level of cuts to administrative support staff within the faculties and central services, many of whom resolved HDR student issues at the local level. The MGA anticipated an increase in advocacy cases as a result. Sam had participated on the Supervisor of the Year award selection panel and noted that with 105 nominations to read, there needed to be a review of the selection process for next year as this was a huge task.

Ailsa reported that the JD students wanted their own club and had been turned down by the MSA for funding due to being off-campus. It was explained that the MGA was the appropriate body to apply to and would be keen to fund the JD group so that they could run social events for their members. Aman offered to provide advice to the group should they require it.

Wendy informed members that MIISON had received funding to establish laptop loans for students, as well as for food distribution. The elections for the MIISON President position for 2021 had not yet been held. The MGA to help advertise MIISON activities.

3.3 Staff report

Noted.

3.4 October 2020 profit and loss report

Noted.

3.5 MGAEC meeting attendance records

Jess noted that the records should be adjusted to record her as an apology for October.

4. Business

4.1 Business arising

4.1.1 Graduate Coursework issues

Caitlyn reported that the request for a reduction in coursework fees as an acknowledgement of the reduced quality of the graduate course delivery and overall experience, had been raised again at Education Committee. In response the Chair of

Education Committee had noted that students were performing 2-4% better than this time last year, and student satisfaction had slightly increased according to the SETU data. It was also argued that online delivery cost more because of the specialised software required. The MGA had argued that the increased cost of delivering the course was not an expense that students should be expected to take on. The university made it clear that they had no intention of reducing course fees.

A number of examples were raised where the quality of the teaching and learning experience was suboptimal. Caitlyn would work with the Student Experience team to resolve these specific issues. Examples of problems with the e-exams system were also raised and it was agreed that the MGA would work with the university to ensure these issues were addressed prior to the next exam round.

Ke Xiou queried whether there had been any discussion around placements. She noted that the biggest concerns among the Social Work cohort were inconsistencies with placements and the ratio of students to placement supervisors. It was noted that there were long standing problems with social work placements that the advocates had been dealing with over the years. Some improvements had been made through negotiations with the faculty but there were systemic issues that had not been addressed. It was agreed that Ke Xiou should meet with Caitlyn, Zuzana and Sarah to discuss this further and develop a strategy for resolving these issues.

Hang queried whether the course fees would remain the same in 2021 when students would no longer receive the same experience or opportunities as they would have prior to COVID, with oncampus activities and access being restricted. It was agreed that given the university's repeated refusal to consider a course fee reduction it seemed unlikely that this would change in 2021.

Aman reported that he had raised a number of student complaints with the Faculty of IT and had received a reasonable response from the faculty. Zuzana noted that the advocates had received a large number of complaints about the faculty issuing allegations of cheating against the students. Through individual cases the MGA had successfully supported many of the students to refute the allegations, which were on the whole considered by the MGA to be unreasonably applied by the faculty. As a result the faculty agreed to make changes to their processes in relation to invigilators and the MGA is working with the university to ensure students have access to advocacy during those processes. Aman raised a concern that the details of the exams were not being made available until very close to the exam dates. Zuzana advised that in this instance students should contact the chief examiner before the exam.

Caitlyn added that there had been many instances where students had experienced technical difficulties with their exams, as raised at the MGA fora, and these concerns had been brought to the attention of the university. It was also reported at VC-SPAF that additional money had been allocated to hardship packages.

4.1.2 HDR issues

Issues raised by HDR students at the recent MGA graduate research student forum were initially raised with GRC Chair Prof Matthew Gillespie in a letter from the MGA Research Education Officer, to which a reply was received (both letters were tabled at the September 2020 MGAEC meeting). A few issues were followed-up in the November MGA report to GRC, and an equity issue relating to unpaid leave was also placed on the agenda for the next Diversity and Inclusion meeting. Outstanding issues

were to be raised with the GRC Chair at the next meeting of the Faculty reps with a subset of GRC members.

4.1.3 Free statistical service for HDR students

The MGA had been alerted to a dramatic reduction in the availability of free individual statistical consultation hours (from 300 hours per year to 50 hours per year) for HDR students requiring assistance with the planning, collection and analysis of research project data. This matter was set out in detail in the MGA's November report to GRC. It was reported that the MGA was protesting the reduction and requesting that the service be reinstated until there had been a comprehensive and independent review including consultation with the MGA and HDR student users. The matter would be raised at the GRC November meeting and had been flagged for further discussion at the next VC-SPAF meeting.

4.1.4 Closure of Science Instrumentation Facility

The proposed closure of the Science Instrumentation Facility was raised and discussed in the October 2020 MGAEC meeting. The MGA wrote a letter arguing against the closure to the Vice-Chancellor and the Provost and a generic response had been received from the Provost. In a further communication with the Provost, the MGA noted that the other Monash technical facilities could not in some instances provide the expertise to support specialised equipment currently in use in some HDR research projects. The MGA requested that the university guarantee that equipment be serviced, adjusted and/or repaired by an external company if required, to enable all current research projects to be seen through to completion without major changes having to be made to the project or any costs incurred by students.

In response the Provost assured the MGA that "students will not be disadvantaged by any of the changes we are making at the University in 2020."
The matter was also placed on the agenda for the next GRC meeting.

4.1.5 Communicating MGAEC representational activities

A register of lobbying actions had been established and shared with MGAEC members. Members were encouraged to log their lobbying and representational activities on this site so that the MGA could maintain a comprehensive data-base of representational activities. The information would then be used to inform MGA newsletters, website, social media, university committee reports and annual reports.

4.2 General Business

4.2.1 Term deposit

Members were reminded that the MGA held a term deposit which comprised all the staff entitlements required to be held by law under the National Employment Standards. The term deposit was due to expire on 17 December 2020. The committee was asked to approve the reinvestment of these funds into a further short-term deposit at the best rate offered on the day. It was proposed that the interest from the expired term deposit be returned to the operating account for expenditure in 2021, given it was anticipated that the MGA income for 2021 would be reduced again due to low enrolment numbers.

It was moved:

That the term deposit held by the MGA due to expire on 17 December 2020 be reinvested in a further short-term deposit at the best rate of the day on 17 December

2020, and the interest be moved to the MGA daily operating account for expenditure in 2021.

Moved: Emily
Seconded: Aman
Carried.

The committee expressed a desire to invest graduate funds in a financial institution with ethical and environmentally-friendly policies. It was agreed that when the term deposit rates were being reviewed, the policies of the institution would also be taken into account. Plans to also move the regular banking accounts from Westpac would be considered in 2021.

4.2.2 Staffing proposal

A staffing matter was considered in camera.

It was moved:

That the contract for the Student Representative Liaison position due to expire on 20 December 2020 not be renewed due to lack of funds.

Moved: Elliot
Seconded: Ailsa
Carried.

4.2.3 MGA budget for 2021

The proposed budget for 2021 was presented to the committee. The MGA had been instructed by the university to prepare a budget based on the 2019 income. However, given the uncertainty around the funding for next year, two versions of the budget had been prepared: a “worst case scenario” version for internal purposes and a “best case” scenario version, based on the 2019 funding and for submission to the university. While the SSAF fees would be restored to their usual levels for 2021 (with Monash being the only G08 university that had discounted their SSAF fees in 2020), it was expected that international student enrolments would be down by at least 15%, and possibly by more for graduate enrolments. Potential increases in domestic enrolments due to the recession were unlikely to compensate for the decline in international student enrolments. In addition, the reduction in enrolments from 2020 would have a roll-on effect in 2021 and 2022. It was anticipated that budgets would not return to normal until 2023.

It was confirmed that the MGA had the surplus to support a \$400,000 deficit in 2021, as set out in the worst case scenario budget, but that this would mean going into 2022 without any surplus.

It was moved:

That the draft budget for 2021 be approved.

Moved: Ailsa
Seconded: Preeti
Carried.

4.2.4 Funding Agreements for Caulfield, Peninsula and Clayton

Caitlyn updated the committee on the status of the funding agreements with the undergraduates, where the MGA was required to transfer graduate SSAF to the undergraduate student associations, for graduate student use of their generic services.

The status of the negotiations regarding the transfer of graduate funds to the undergraduates for the 2021 – 2023 funding period was as follows:

Caulfield – one meeting had been held and the proposed conditions and funding levels had received in principle agreement from the MONSU Caulfield President. The agreement was now in the process of being signed by both parties. MONSU Caulfield had agreed to reduce their dependency on graduate student funding in recognition that graduate students should control the expenditure of graduate funds. The payments to MONSU Caulfield would be 2021 (\$65,000), 2022 (\$55,000) and 2023 (\$45,000).

Peninsula – one meeting had been held and the proposed conditions and funding levels had received in principle agreement from the MONSU Peninsula President. The agreement had now been signed by both parties. The payments to MONSU Peninsula would be \$4000 per year from 2021 – 2023.

Clayton – one meeting had been held with a second meeting planned for 13 Nov. Agreement was reached on a few broad principles but there were a significant number of points of difference, with the MSA-Clayton wanting 10-12% of the graduate SSAF (equating to approximately \$140,000 per year) and the MGA calculating that graduates were receiving approximately \$30,000 worth of relevant services from the undergraduates.

It was noted that the MSA-Clayton may not have the will or the maturity to be able to successfully engage in the negotiation process. Discussions to date had made it clear that the undergraduate representatives had little understanding of graduate needs, nor the ability to acknowledge their own limits to understanding a different cohort. Of most concern, their position failed to acknowledge the right of graduate students to determine the expenditure of graduate SSAF, despite this being the very principle on which their own organisation was founded.

4.2.5 Public transport concessions and COVID

James, one of the MGA advocates having previously worked for an MP and with some experience in lobbying government departments, proposed that the committee consider using the results of the MGA COVID-19 survey to restart a discussion on the MGA's long-term lobbying efforts to achieve public transport concessions for graduate students. The committee discussed the draft submission brief, which set out the current situation as well as a letter that could be sent to the Victorian Minister for Transport. It was agreed that a working group comprising Ailsa, Ke Xious, Preeti, Stacey, Caitlyn and James would be formed.

4.2.6 Staff training session

It was noted that the staff professional development budget line item had been reduced to zero early in 2020 to assist the MGA to manage their reduced 2020 budget. The committee discussed a request that the MGA run a two hour training session on innovation for all staff, conducted by an external consultancy group.

It was moved:

That \$2500 be moved from the Clayton programs and events line item to the staff professional development line item.

Moved: Caitlyn (Chair).
Carried.

4.2.7 Feedback to MNHS

The committee noted the feedback that had been provided to the Faculty of MNHS by the MGA on the Professional Behaviour Process for students, and the student information guide.

4.2.8 Summer activities

Caitlyn had been asked by university management to consider activities that could be run over summer during university close down, for students stranded in Australia and unable to get home, as well as for students stranded overseas. There was heightened concern about an increase in mental health issues and loneliness among the student population.

It was noted that the MGA would be running a social program which linked groups of graduates with each other and allocated a student volunteer to each group. A plan for activities was provided along with some funding for the groups to run their own social events during the break.

Zuzana informed the committee that there tended to be an increase in students seeking advocacy just before weekends, public holidays and the Christmas break. During the University closedown Zuzana checked the advocacy email daily. One helpful change the university had made in response to MGA lobbying, was that letters about unsatisfactory progress would now be sent to students when the university reopened in January, rather than just before university closedown when support services were closing.

Jan also noted that the social media accounts were monitored during the university break, so if anything urgent came up it would be sent through to Zuzana and/or Jenny.

Aman suggested making a short promotional video advertising what services the MGA provided to ensure students knew where to go for assistance. Caitlyn asked for any ideas to be sent to her.

5. Membership

At least one member, Wendy Febrita, was scheduled to complete her course in December 2020 and could therefore no longer hold a position on the MGAEC. It was agreed that the MGA would advertise the vacancy over November and coopt at the December meeting for a graduate student who was willing to take up either the position of International Students' Officer or Disability Officer, to officially start with the committee in January 2021.

6. Next meeting

Members were reminded that there was no meeting in January. It was agreed that the next meeting would be held by zoom on Thursday 11 February, from 4pm – 5.30pm.