

Meeting 11/2023

A meeting of the **Monash Graduate Association (MGA) Executive Committee** was held from 10:00am – 12:00pm, Friday 24 November 2023, in the MGA meeting room C2, Caulfield campus and by zoom.

MINUTES

The meeting commenced inquorate at 10.08am. The meeting became quorate at 10.23am.

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, Calvin Chow (arrived at 11.15am), Ying-Xian Lai, Harshita Rathi (arrived 10.35am), Rachel Lee, and Saral Gupta, Maria Lammerding (arrived 10.30am), Jonathan Robberts (arrived 10.47am), Arathy Kurup, Grace Bennetts and Mahima Choudhary.

Apologies: Ummatul Siddique, Phil Cairns, Prashansa Chadha, Jenny Reeder

In attendance: Zuzana Quinn, Senior Advocate
Janice Boey, Student Engagement Manager
Charlie Li, HR and Finance Manager
James Breheny, Advocate,
Ryan Edwards, Research Officer
Ash Finn, Graduate Policy and Liaison Officer

1.3 Consideration of the agenda

No items were added.

2. Minutes and Action sheet

2.1 Minutes of meeting 10/2023 for confirmation

It was moved:

That the minutes of MGAEC meeting October 10/2023 be confirmed.

Moved: Evelyn Ying-Xian Lai

Seconded: Maria Lammerding

Carried.

2.2 Action sheet

Noted.

3. Reports – 3.00pm

3.1 President’s report

Noted.

3.2 Members’ reports

Noted.

3.3 Staff report

Noted.

3.4 October 2023 profit and loss report

Noted.

3.5 MGAEC meeting attendance records

Noted.

3.6 VC-SPAF agenda

Saham explained that Calvin, in his capacity as MIISON spokesperson, would join Saham at the next meeting of VC-SPAF, scheduled for 27 November. Saham requested that any issues members wanted raised should be directed to him by email prior to the meeting.

A discussion took place regarding the potential increase of the HDR stipend. Saham advised that the 2024 stipend rate had not yet been decided by Monash.

A number of members also noted the cost of accommodation on campus was very high. Although there were a few accommodation scholarships available, the eligibility criteria were narrow, and students were struggling to pay their rent.

4. Business

4.1 Business arising

4.1.1 MGA 2023 funding update

Saham updated the MGAEC on the latest correspondence with the University regarding this matter. Allegations had been levelled against the MGA in June 2023, by a disgruntled ex-committee member who had been excluded from the recent MGAEC elections for a serious breach of those election regulations, and had then complained to the Vice-Chancellor. In order to clarify the matter, the MGA had agreed to allow the University auditor to review the MGA election processes and practices. The University’s auditor reviewed the MGA election processes and dismissed the allegations as unsubstantiated. Additionally, the auditor made several recommendations for improving the running of the elections. The university senior management had then announced that the receipt of the MGA 2023 last quarter’s funding was dependent on the MGA agreeing to implement all the university auditor’s recommendations.

The committee was concerned that by placing additional conditions on the MGA in order to receive their funding, the university was abusing their power and breaching the terms of the Funding Agreement. The committee acknowledged that while most of the recommendations were minor and some had already been put in place by the MGA, it was not the university’s role to make and amend the regulations of the MGA;

that responsibility sat with the MGAEC. However, it was also recognised that there was some merit in a pragmatic approach where the recommendations were agreed to in order to put an end to the matter. The committee discussed their options at length and the following points were made:

- The university needed to understand that the MGA was not required to accept the recommendations contained in the COO's email in order to receive their funding.
- The MGAEC felt very strongly that, given there had been no complaints about the MGA election process in the past 20 years, one unsubstantiated and frivolous complaint should not result in the MGA having to radically alter current practice.
- The MGAEC felt uncomfortable spending student money on employing an external Returning Officer, when this was unnecessary.
- If the MGA were to agree to the recommendations, the cost of appointing an external Returning Officer would need to be covered by the university, as this would sit outside the MGA's budget.

It was agreed that Saham would write to Peter Marshall, the University COO, about the matter.

4.1.2 PTV campaign update

Maria explained that the funding arrangements for concessions were complex. She intended to conduct some research into the matter to understand the PTV concession framework. For example, it was currently unclear as to the range of PTV concessions that were currently available to graduate students and how they were being funded. She agreed to also ascertain Monash's position on this issue so that the MGA could target the correct decision-makers. Maria intended to put out a call to students to get them engaged and involved, so that there was a critical group to carry on with this campaign once Maria had left the university.

4.1.3 PPA 2024 budget

Following on from the difficulties experienced by the PPA in managing their 2023 budget, it was noted that the MGA staff would work with the incoming PPA committee to assist them in preparing their 2024 budget.

4.2 General Business

4.2.1 MGA 2024 budget

The draft 2024 budget was prepared and circulated to the MGAEC prior to the meeting. Saham explained the budget had a much smaller deficit for 2024, and that while the MGA had relied on their reserves to cover any deficit in previous years, there was very little reserve available for 2024. This meant that some projects would need to be cancelled or restricted.

It was proposed that this budget be passed and submitted to the university, with a further review of the financial situation to take place after census date next year, given the MGA's income was linked to student enrolment numbers. At that point the 2024

estimated income would be able to be more accurately calculated given the bulk of the student enrolments would have occurred by then.

Saral raised a concern about the cancellation of Sustainability Week. He was of the view that this event should not be cancelled, as it was a major event for the MGA. He was hopeful savings could be made elsewhere to allow for this event to go ahead. Saral also suggested that Monash could be approached to fund this. Saham explained that the events program could be changed during the year if there was a change in the expected income. It was explained that the \$10,000 that had been allocated was needed to keep the MGA accredited with Climate Active.

Jan noted that in 2023, the MGA had spent \$17,000 to deliver the Sustainability event across the four campuses. Sponsorships were also received so some expenses were provided at cost. Jan invited the MGAEC members to contact her with any ideas on how to run sustainability week in a different form next year. She suggested that the MGAEC could look at improving the sustainability of MGA policies and procedures as part of a different delivery in 2024.

It was moved:

That the MGA budget 2024 be confirmed and accepted.

Moved: Maria Lammerding
Seconded: Jonathan Robberts
Carried.

4.2.2 Welfare regulations

Maria explained that after meeting with Zuzana and Hamida some changes to the welfare program eligibility criteria had been proposed, with the aim of making eligibility clearer for students when applying. Maria recommended a six monthly review of the program, with a review panel comprising interested committee members and advocacy staff, who were in the best position to identify demand and trends.

It was moved:

That the MGA Welfare Regulation amendments be confirmed and accepted.

Moved: Jonathan Robberts
Seconded: Maria Lammerding
Carried.

4.2.3 2024 Orientation

The orientation schedule for semester one, 2024 was noted and Saham stressed the importance of MGAEC members participating in the orientation programs of the MGA, explaining that any willing volunteers should get in touch with Jan.

4.2.4 Law Chambers request for sanitary products

The Law Student's Society (LSS), run under the undergraduate student association MSA-Clayton, had requested that the MGA fund free sanitary products at the Law Chambers for their graduate student members. The university currently ran a program where free products were supplied by BPD to every campus, but the program had not been extended to the off-campus sites. BPD had advised that because the Law

Chambers was not owned by Monash, dispensing units could not be installed. However, the LSS students had volunteered to manually run the program.

Saham spoke to this item noting that the MSA already received in the vicinity of \$166,000 annually from the MGA as part of the funding agreement, ostensibly to cover graduate students involved in MSA events and clubs. He recommended that the MGAEC needed to be mindful on further financial contributions to MSA-run programs.

There was a suggestion that some funding from the OB budget could be used to contribute to the program. It was agreed that there should be further investigation via discussions with the MSA and BPD regarding who should be funding this program.

4.2.5 Gaza

Maria proposed that it was important for the MGA to speak out on international issues. She was of the view that the MGA should put out a statement insisting on a cease fire in Gaza. She volunteered to draft a statement and submit the wording to the MGAEC after the meeting for approval, prior to release.

The MGAEC held a lengthy discussion noting that there would be a range of opinions in the graduate student community and as the representative body, the MGA had a responsibility to ensure that certain student cohorts were not alienated by any position taken by the organisation. It was acknowledged that this was a very complicated and divisive situation, and it was questioned whether or not it was the role of the MGA to make statements on public issues. It was agreed that it was very important to let all traumatised students know they were supported by the MGA and to direct students to counselling for professional support. Maria acknowledged that some hostility to any statement would probably occur.

The outcome of discussions was that the MGAEC would vote first on whether or not members saw it as their responsibility to comment on the Gaza situation, and if that motion were to pass, a statement would then be drafted by Maria for approval by the MGAEC via a second motion. As the meeting had lost quorum, the voting would be conducted by email, following the process set out under the General Regulations of the MGA.

4.2.6 CAPA

Saham explained CAPA's role as the national postgraduate representative body. He explained CAPA became dysfunctional in 2022, and this was why in 2023 CAPA waived the MGA's affiliation fee, acknowledging that they had not fulfilled their duties that year. There appeared to be two individuals currently announcing themselves as CAPA President. One of these individuals had reached out to the MGA to work through the MGA's concerns. Saham suggested a list of MGA's concerns needed to be sent to CAPA, with a request that they respond.

Calvin pointed out the value of being affiliated with a national representative body subject to their proper functioning. Jonathan was of the view that CAPA would need to make a strong case to convince the MGA to engage with them again. It was agreed that CAPA would need to explain how they intended to remedy the situation.

The MGAEC unanimously agreed that no funding was to be provided to CAPA for 2024. Saham agreed to write to CAPA outlining the MGA's concerns and asking for an explanation of how they intended to function going forward, including a budget that showed how they intended to spend membership fees.

5. Membership matters

Saham advised that Maria and Saral would finish their courses and thus also their roles on the MGAEC at the end of the year. He thanked them both for their significant contributions to the MGA, and the wider graduate community. The Caulfield representative position and a general member position would therefore become vacant. Anyone eligible on the MGAEC to take up either the Caulfield representative role or the vacated office-bearer role of Coursework Officer (previously held by Maria) were welcome to apply. Pending the outcome of any internal elections, the remaining positions would be externally advertised for co-option. It was agreed that this would be further discussed at the December meeting.

6. Next meeting

The next meeting would be held in December 2023 at a time and date to accommodate members.

The meeting closed at 12.21pm.

