

UMSU Students' Council: A report on functionality and the future

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Introduction & Context

Students' Council is the governing body of the University of Melbourne Student Union (UMSU). UMSU's Students' Council is made up of 21 elected students, with 6 of them elected from restricted constituencies.

Following the 2016 annual student election, the returning officers wrote an election report that included many recommendations. One of these put forth an observation on the complexity of the election.

The report considered the following:

“Constitutional change this year added yet another office-bearer, another committee and another special representative on Students' Council – this time to address the concerns of people of color. There are now 15 office-bearers, ten committees and six special representatives (not counting the VCA and Burnley positions); when this constitutional structure was first introduced, in 1980, those numbers were four, three and zero respectively. It is not obvious where this process of expansion might stop. Every move to provide representation for a hitherto-marginalised group, taken in isolation, seems eminently reasonable. And of course it is entirely up to the union to determine how it wants to structure its operations. Nonetheless, it appears to the Returning Officer that insufficient attention has been paid to the cumulative effect of these moves. Expansion comes at a cost: a financial cost, obviously, but also a cost in complexity that deters potential voters. This year, at least one ticket had to be warned for trying to attract voters with the pitch “it'll only take you 30 seconds.” The reality is that voting takes several minutes, and is a process that most students seem to find bewildering. In 1980, more than one student in four voted; now it is fewer than one in 15. No one would suggest that the ballooning structural complexity is the only thing responsible for that change, but it needs to take a share of the blame. It is particularly unfortunate that measures whose purpose is to increase representation should have the paradoxical effect of making the union less representative. It is recommended that constitutional reform in the future should seriously consider rationalising the union's structure in some way that would permit simpler elections.”

- Above Quota Elections 2016

This report is written by the 2016/17 UMSU General Secretary, its purpose is for outlook and discussion only and is in no way to devalue the work previous administrations have achieved, nor is it reflective of an intent to lessen the role that UMSU plays in representing students from marginalised backgrounds. However, it is important for us to evaluate areas where, as an organisation, we can improve. With an increasing number of inquorate meetings, and a significant lack of in-depth understanding of complex issues

on the part of many Councillors, there is mounting need for reform of the Students' Council process and function.

This report focuses on four key issues that have been influenced from the Returning Officer report, student input and my own observations as the General Secretary and usual elected chair of Students' Council. These issues are:

- The number of voting members on Council
- The autonomous representation
- The culture of Students' Council
- Reward & recognition for Councillors

Council Number

UMSU's Student Council is one of the only independent student councils in Australia, meaning that Office Bearers cannot and do not sit on the voting side of the representative body. Although a definite win for conflict of interest and Council authority over Officers, it does not bode well for reaching quorum.

Below is a comparative list of other notable student unions across the country.

Representative Body	Number of Voting Councillors	Comments
University of Melbourne Student Union (Students' Council)	21 Councillors; 6 autonomous and 15 general	Struggles with quorum
University of Melbourne Graduate Student Association	15 Graduate Councillors; 10 OBs (3 of which are autonomous) and 5 general	From what I've heard, generally runs well. NIGHT COUNCIL.
Monash Student Association (Students Council)	22 Councillors – All Office Bearers	Doesn't lose quorum, conflict of interest issues though
La Trobe Student Union (Student Council)	11 Councillors – 4 are OBs, 7 are general	Reaches quorum.
University of Sydney (Student Representative Council)	33 voting members including a majority of Office Bearers	Struggles with quorum
University of Queensland Union (Union Council)	15 Councillors – elected from their faculties	Most similar to ours, has interesting crossovers with other organisations at UQU
Corporate world	Average of 9.2 people sit on a board of directors	Just an interesting comparison

As seen with other Australian student representative bodies that are made up of only student officers, quorum is consistently met. This can be attributed to

their availability on campus from having an office and their reliability from being paid.

In representative bodies without OBs (where I believe we should firmly stay) the struggle for quorum is a huge issue. In 2016 there were 4 inquorate councils, as of midyear 2017 we've already had 3 inquorate councils. For quorum to be met, half plus one of the council must be present which is often difficult to achieve, especially in non-teaching periods.

The number of Councillors does influence time management during council as well. With 21 people all requiring an opportunity for input, particularly during controversial topics, this can cause council to run upwards of 3 hours.

Keeping these two issues, quorum and timeliness, in mind, the solution seems to be to reduce the membership size of Council. This will allow for a group of individuals to meet at more flexible times, reduces the quorum and allows for more meetings of Council, such as in the event of petitioned meetings.

It's important to note that if council size was to decrease, the ideal number seems to be between 11-15 for an organisation of this nature. Council size would have to be limited to an odd number to avoid an even split during voting. If people believe an even number is required, the casting vote would go to the chair, which is usually an office bearer.

However, it must be pointed out that UMSU's committees also struggle to reach quorum with only 7 members appointed. Cutting council size down is a Band-Aid cure for a more inherent problem around the culture of student politics at the University of Melbourne.

Autonomous Representatives

UMSU's Students' Council is unique in the fact that we have elected autonomous representation that isn't Office Bearer related. We have elected councillors from restricted constituencies, they are; Students with Disabilities, Students of Colour, International Students, Graduate Students, Queer students and Indigenous students.

Through researching, I do not believe it wise or a requirement of this organisation to abolish autonomous representatives on council. However, I will discuss the potential updates that can be made to two positions that can make them more functional and useful.

It's ironic that the two restricted groups that are easiest to take out of the mix of representation, International and Graduate, are the two most underrepresented groups in Students' Council. Making up a significant portion of the campus population, International student and Graduate students are still sorely underrepresented.

We can possibly put this down to a few different contributing factors; firstly, both of these groups have their own organisations or groups that contribute more to these student demographics – these being UMSU International and the Graduate Student Association. Secondly, that autonomous

representatives currently do not function as they were perhaps envisioned, in typically they do not actively report on or to the demographics they were elected to represent, nor do they regularly advocate for these demographics in the course of their duties. This is not a criticism of individual representatives but rather a reflection on the way in which this representative system operates.

Currently, the UMSU International elections are under a magnifying glass as well as the lack of cohesion with UMSU as a whole. UMSU International requires an official bridge to bring the two bodies together. Similarly, the Graduate Student Association does not have any crossover with UMSU apart from meetings with the University. UMSU International and the GSA have nothing to do with the students elected as their demographic representatives.

There are two options I am outlining for this issue.

Option 1) The graduate and international representatives are abolished from council and not replaced in size number. The UMSU International President is appointed to Students' Council as a non-voting member. The President is required to submit a report either at every council (in keeping with requirements for UMSU OBs) or in a timed fashion (quarterly, semesterly). The UMSU International President would report on UMSU International's current functioning and the issues facing international students as well as their feedback. The GSA President would be encouraged to do something similar, although UMSU does not have any jurisdiction over the GSA's activities. Ultimately a crossover reporting mechanism should be proposed. This would allow the GSA President and UMSU President to report to the other organisation's Council every quarter or semester. This would be a sign of good faith, enhancing the relationship between the two organisations and allowing a better insight into graduate news and feedback.

Option 2) We keep all autonomous representatives, including graduate and international. The corresponding bodies, however, would elect these two positions. The GSA and UMSU International would either have the authority to appoint a person to sit on council or the position could be elected through their elections. As timing is different and this would require a lot more negotiating, this is the more difficult option of the 2.

Students' Council 'Culture'

It is ridiculous that, as the General Secretary, I have to constantly remind councillors that they are the board of directors of a multi-million dollar organisation and that they have legal obligations in that position. The culture of Students' Council has reduced it to a consolation prize in the annual elections, which is becoming more and more problematic.

The current issues that arise from this 'culture' are:

- Council does not take priority over anything else
- Volunteering that is thankless
- Not reading papers due to a lack of understanding

- A misunderstanding of the power
- Ideological arguments that don't affect the functionality of the organisation

Some of these can be combatted with a simple change in regulation and policy. I believe the best way to counteract the digressing culture of council is to instil a Regulation for Students' Councillors similar to the Regulation for Student Office Bearers.

The regulation would require the following points:

- A dedicated protocol for induction, including a timeline for when this occurs.
- Councillors that do not attend this induction will need to attend a follow up induction, if they do not attend that they are removed from council.
- The induction would be at least a day with workshops on legal obligations, proper meeting procedure, decision-making and conflict resolution training.

Additionally, a review into the disciplinary measures against councillors may be required. The Graduate Student Association has a policy that removes a councillor after missing 3 total meetings. If we were to make this change this would combat two issues of culture and of quorum. Some may say this is harsh or even discriminatory to want to change this, but we have to remember that this is the paramount board in UMSU and should be treated with a certain amount of professional respect. To counteract legitimate people getting kicked off though, we should have a doctors certificate mechanism as well as look into a fully functional skype/teleconference system. A teleconference system would allow students from off campus to participate in council and close the quorum gap.

Reward & Recognition

UMSU Students' Councillors are unpaid volunteers that receive less recognition than most committees in UMSU do. Volunteers are treated incredibly well at UMSU, yet Councillors aren't given the same rewards or recognition.

Ultimately, it comes down to two options; paying councillors or compensating them with something (food probably). I believe, for the sake of the budget and the *current* work that's achieved by council, that paying a wage or honoraria is out of the question. Compensating councillors with sustenance (as referenced as the appropriate terms by the ATO) is a normal thing that organisations do. From my understanding though, when this has been raised in the past there has been significant push back. Should Councillors be allowing the use of student's money in this way?

If this is the case, Councillors should at least receive compensation in another way. Perhaps this could be done through alternative routes like professional development.

In Summary

From the observations made I believe the most functional way to continue council would be the following:

- Cut council size down to a smaller size, an odd number between 11 and 15 seems sensible.
- Allot 4 positions for minority representation for students with disabilities, students of colour, queer students and Indigenous students.
- Appoint the UMSU International President to Students' Council as a non-voting member. Require them to report at the end of every semester on UMSU International as well as table International student issues or feedback.
- Cross report with the Graduate Student Association, where their President reports to UMSU Students' Council and our President reports to their council. Their report should include feedback and issues that UMSU should be made aware of for Graduate Students.
- Students' Council should have its own set of regulations, similar to the regulations for student office bearers
- This regulation shall include a protocol for an induction process that requires councillors to attend. Legal obligations, meeting procedure and board training.
- Councillors will receive compensation for their efforts in the form of sustenance whilst in attendance at council.