Minutes of the CUSU Board of Trustees, 15/03/18

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<th>Meeting of:</th>
<th>CUSU Trustee Board</th>
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<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>CUSU Offices, 17 Mill Lane</td>
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<tr>
<td>Date/Time:</td>
<td>6pm, 15 March 2018</td>
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<td>In Attendance:</td>
<td>Trustees: Chair, Daisy Eyre (DE); Helen Jennings (HJ); Daniel Dennis (DD); Martha Krish (MK); Lola Olufemi (LO); Hannah Thackwray (HT); Florence Oulds (FO);</td>
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<td>Apologies:</td>
<td>Gareth Marlow (GM); Hachimi Maiga (HM); Olivia Hylton-Pennant (OHP); Micha Frazer-Carroll (MFC).</td>
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<td>Invitees in attendance:</td>
<td>Mark McCormack (MM).</td>
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A. Board Administration

i) **Introductions and apologies for absence** – HM, GM, OHP and MFC sent apologies.

ii) **Conflicts of interest** - None.

iii) **Minutes of the last meeting and matters arising**

Board noted the Finance Committee minutes had not been tabled.  
**Action:** FinCom minutes to come to next meeting.  
**Decision:** Minutes from last meeting approved

iv) **Starring and ordering or items for decision/discussion; deferring of items until next Board.**

Order for discussion decided in meeting: organisational updates, TCS and NUS affiliation. Trustee recruitment to also be discussed.

B. Organisation Updates

i) **Organisational Updates from President and General Manager**

- The sabbatical officers have been busy fulfilling the Council mandate to demonstrate solidarity with the UCU strike and trying to mediate the impacts on students/provide advice and information. This has included how exams can be adapted considering missed lectures. Few motions passed.
- Budget passed well at Council, although possible reallocation of money from publications to campaigning was brought up; though members supported using the council free budget. There has been no negative headlines from press. Budget may have got more press if not for the strikes. Budget requires one more vote, after Easter,
to be approved. The use of a video was deemed successful for engagement from students; it was recommended that sabbatical officers use more videos as explained budget well.

- Audit is ongoing, with lots of work undertaken by finance, which will pay off in the new financial year. The finance clerk is working hard.

- Membership Team is very busy but expect to put forward a firm proposal on required website develop soon. Current site has attracted some criticism from student press. Moving from the old website was difficult, and a strategy on existing web platforms needs to be incorporated into any new web initiative.

- Big Cambridge Survey to be launched over Easter. This is an annual survey.

- MM congratulated the officer team over the last few weeks with supporting the strike and student concerns as well as working through criticism from some regarding the strike position taken democratically by members. CUSU council are all elected and they voted in favour of the action; and so the elected officers have acted on this, as directed. Visibility is so good on the issue.

- Still waiting to hear resolution on three sources of finance for next year:
  - College levy (former affiliation fee): MM is optimistic this will be accepted; would be ramifications if it were not accepted meaning that CUSU would have to reduce/restructure its activities. The levy is restricted.
  - Sexual health supply levy: there are no concerns about this fund request being accepted.
  - Widening Participation Project Fund request: The new grant is oversubscribed and there has been some skepticism about motivations CUSU's increased request. The request asked for additional funds as portion of elected officer role.

ii) SCA Relocation

- TCS would be comfortable sharing the student computer space if doing so was deemed necessary.

- SCA expect to pay a contribution towards the costs of space, which will represent a saving for SCA on their previous arrangements. The trustees, in their October meeting, were keen to not be seen to profit from sharing space, instead seeing the supporting of SCA as consistent with the union’s charitable aims. The same method was used to calculate charges as it used in funding proposals within the university community. Fees will be shared with the GU, likely taking form of a shared fund to cover shared costs such as cleaning, network fees etc.

iii) RAG restructure

- MM reported that RAG have decided they will be run completely voluntarily and not have a paid president. They were concerned whether they would still have access to space without paid employee. We will apply same agreement template to RAG as we have with SCA.

Trustees had concerns about the use of the space, such as whether the space would be used/allocated efficiently (for example, in comparison with other space needs); and whether
the space would be kept in good order, clean and in consideration for CUSU colleagues working in the same space. The maintenance of security in the office was also a concern.

The trustees did not feel it appropriate for RAG’s entire committee to use a small space and single desk in the CUSU office, as this required sharing office security with the whole RAG committee; the committee could become too transient.

It was suggested that the desk space may aid the transition in the unstable period of change. The trustees suggested RAG nominate an officer to liaise with CUSU and be responsible for the space, and that up to two RAG role-holders might use the existing RAG space as a ‘hot-desk’ over the next year on a trial basis; however should problems occur or the space was not properly utilised/maintained, the Union may suggest RAG use computers available in other locations or spaces.

C. Items for discussion

i) Student feedback on draft strategic plan

A survey had been put to students to gauge feedback on the draft strategic plan. Comments suggested the respondents had mixed views about the union. They provided a lot of comments. Findings and discussion

- The mission is right, but language could be tweaked. There were comments about the clarity of phrasing.
- Enablers are more important.
- Some students showed concern that CUSU have political bias, though no evidence nor any reference to the plan was indicated.
- There was overwhelming agreement that the direction and associated work of the plan was right. There was broad agreement to plans.
- The trustees discussed that the work of CUSU is often defined by flash-in-the-pan news which colours opinions without having a fair basis in the actual situation. For example, many think CUSU is more militantly political than it is.
- An additional enabler regarding student democracy may be a good idea.
- The plan could be more explicit in how each of the goals are linked.
- There was general support for CUSU’s work on behalf of some constituent communities that may face greater barriers in their education; however communicating this needs to be thought of carefully, e.g. what may not benefit you specifically will likely a peer.

The trustees discussed the extent of risk of political bias within the draft of the plan: Most students seem to like the draft. The trustees considered the principles of the plan and the general audience of the charity against the feedback. It was noted that skeptics of the Union’s work had valuable criticism, though this may not stop firm decisions on the sort of union the charity felt its members and the institution required. A key signal from the feedback was that some entrenched skeptics of the union would not be won by any remedial strategy of the union.
The mission statement should think more deeply about how members inform what we do.

- Need to equally represent those skeptical of the union, even if they represent a small minority; there was no suggestion these students were not represented by CUSU’s extensive charitable work.
- It would be important to ensure the plan is one that can be championed by the incoming team; the trustees proposed establishing a forum for the new team to have ownership over the ideas.
- The finer details of the plan regards to implementation were seen as lower-order actions to be taken forward by the General Manager; however the strategic direction is a Board issue.

ACTIONS: to attempt to convene the new elected officers to review the plan; and to bring the mission statement to the trustees to discuss again at the next meeting.

ii) Discussion on long-term status of TCS

DE made reference to proposals from FinCom in developing the 2018/19 budget. FinCom presented a 2018/19 budget to the trustees in the final week of February, which has since been approved by the Members.

The 2018/19 budget suggests a deficit of ~£3k. When presenting the budget to Board, FinCom recommended further discussion take place with The Cambridge Student (TCS) newspaper about its funding model and its print product.

The budget foresaw a reduction in CUSU’s Fundraising Team to remove a structural deficit. Campaign budgets were maintained and fundraising targets scrutinised to support a longer-term plan to bring the Union into a surplus-generating phase. The budget advised that further reductions in the deficit could be achieved by asking TCS to consider ceasing print production and going entirely online.

TCS required investment to begin contributing to CUSU’s income portfolio; CUSU had competing products that meant TCS could not generate the returns that other products could due to the cost lay-out of a newspaper.

The Board were encouraged by any plan to invest in TCS and see its revenue/cost structure become more comparable to other CUSU media products. Website investment was foreseen as viable, with long-term costs of web development/maintenance more closely-aligned to revenue expectations.

The trustees had committed to funding another year of print production based on the existing model.

The trustees discussed the item:
- TCS was a valuable student media service, which allowed all students to gain experience writing for a paper. TCS is good to enable a platform for the student voice, which is a good argument to fund it.
- Would be a large ask to ask TCS to go online and any discussion about ceasing a paper product would not to allow sufficient time for the paper to organise a production
model of working around digital; as well as manage the inevitable jibes from competing press.

- The trustees talked around their appetite to accept TCS as a loss-making activity in the aims of supporting a free press, or requiring assertive action to improve the commercial position.
- Alternative funding models were discussed, as were the contacts of trustees in establishing different forms of investment in the paper.
- The trustees were reluctant to continue funding any product without a cohesive product strategy for both product quality and revenue growth; the trustees acknowledged that the paper may require support to compete with other student news providers.
- Popularity of student press mediums ebb and flow: at various times over the years all three main newspapers had occupied the ‘limelight’ of student-centred news in Cambridge.
- It is very common for students’ unions to fund student media groups. However these unions receive specific grants to support student group activities, including media; the trustees were not immediately aware of any other union that funds student groups from its own generated resources alone. Furthermore, few institutions have numerous student newspapers for students to engage in.
- Strong arguments for CUSU’s recurrent funding of TCS was that it offered competition to student press and CUSU ensured a critical press, free to criticise the union and editorially independent, always existed; it ensured student news could be accessible to all no matter their political or social affiliation or background or networks; and TCS gave students the experience of print media that could be useful in future careers.
- However the trustees considered that students have numerous opportunities to develop skills and experiences at Cambridge, and could develop experience with print products – themselves declining in publishing careers – with alternative student media offerings available. With multiple opportunities for student journalists to develop their writing, the funding of a news-site would be more applicable to CUSU’s means and continue to retain other benefits of supporting student journalism.

**Decision:** the trustees decided to maintain the funding within the 2018/19 budget, however actioned the President to begin discussions with TCS Board of Directors about ceasing the print production of the paper from 2019/20.

**iii) Discussion on NUS Affiliation Fee**

CUSU is affiliated to the National union of Students (NUS). NUS charges a fee based on 4% of a students’ union’s ‘block grant’, in the absence of clarity on what constitutes a ‘block grant’, NUS has a committee to make a discrentional decision on the fee.

CUSU has asked NUS for clarity on its fee due to inconsistencies in its invoicing. Last year NUS sent CUSU an invoice for £250, which was budgeted for. NUS then sent a revised invoice for ~£6k, which represented a negative variance in CUSU’s budget. CUSU budgeted for ~£10.5k in 2017/18.
CUSU received an invoice for £250 in the Summer of 2017 ahead of the 2017/18 year and duly paid this invoice. NUS have informed CUSU that the 2017/18 fee will be £1,277.70. NUS have communicated their position to CUSU, which includes an outline of affiliation fees for the next three years, and requested agreement to the fee.

The trustees discussed the item:

- It is helpful to receive clarity on the fee, though it is unhelpful not to have clarity about the criteria for setting the fee.
- Some unions receive block funding and additional restricted funds, but are only charged on the block grant; whereas CUSU is only charged on the restricted fee in absence of the block grant.
- There is a risk that the college levy is treated as a block grant and that this may lead to a dramatic increase in fee, despite this being restricted to advice service costs.
- NUS have short memory and 5 years of discussion has not made a difference to the current discussions regarding fees.
- If affiliation fees increase it likely would cause CUSU to disaffiliate.
- The fee structure proposed was accepted and felt fair considering CUSU’s financial situation.
- However the trustees were frustrated with their lack of engagement in the process and by the whole-sale discretion applied to the union’s situation, which means its fee situation cannot be benchmarked to its SU peers like-for-like.
- Members aware of amount paid and it is a hot topic in Cambridge.

**Decision:** Agreement by board to pay fees.

**iv) Student trustee recruitment**

Recruitment for trustees is behind schedule and has not been acted upon as yet beyond advising CUSU Council of the imminent vacancies.

MM advised that a selection committee could be appointed, but that it would likely need to be done so in Easter term.

The handover/trustee turnover date for student trustees was 14th/15th July.

A deadline of early May Was suggested as a deadline; a short promotion period would be sufficient. Current Board members are eligible to apply again if still a student next year.

**E. Any Other Business**

None.