

Union General Meeting Minutes

Monday 22nd February

3pm - 5pm

Zoom Webinar

Chair: Yesenia Ramirez

Agenda

1. Introduction & Ground Rules
2. **Motion 1:** SOAS SU Incorporation
3. **Motion 2:** Declaration of a SOAS Housing Emergency
4. **Motion 3:** Solidarity with the Uyghur People: Stop the Genocide
5. **Motion 4:** Introduce a Student Parents' Officer to SOAS SU
6. **Motion 5:** Introduce a Part-Time Students' Officer to SOAS SU
7. Executive Committee Reports
8. Ratifying the Minutes of the Previous UGM
9. AOB

1. Ground Rules & Introduction

Yesenia: Hi, I'm Yesenia and I'll be your Chair today. My role is to make sure this meeting runs successfully and respectfully. I'm joined by some of your Sabbatical Officers and SU Staff.

Yesenia ran through the roles of present Officers and Staff.

Yesenia ran through the Agenda and Ground Rules.

2. Motion 1: SOAS SU Incorporation

Proposer Introduction

Anna: This is an administrative motion to allow the SU to make some changes to the organisation. We will have more information on the website following this meeting for you.

All the liability for what we do as an organisation currently lies with our Trustees, but becoming incorporated will remove this. This is in line with most other SUs.

The process involves closing down the SU and opening a new one. There are no changes to what we do, this just changes the legal structure.

As this is a constitution change we need a $\frac{2}{3}$ majority vote. I think this is necessary to protect the organisation into the future, especially after covid.

Questions

Question 1: What SOAS department would then have an interaction with the SU? Is it a legal department? And what extra controls would SOAS be able to exert over the SU? Would there be a problem with free speech?

Answer 1: This would just mean that the Trustees we have who are personally liable would no longer be personally liable. People would be able to take the SU to court instead of our Trustees (as currently stands).

Question 2: Does this mean we'll be run like a charity or a company?

Answer 2: We'll become a Charitable Incorporated Organisation (CIO). We wouldn't be run like a company. We're currently an unincorporated association which works for smaller, more local groups. We employ people and have contracts so it's a big undertaking for individuals to be responsible for that. Most organisations our size are incorporated.

Question 3: Are there restrictions on the functioning of a charity?

Answer 3: Yes, but becoming incorporated won't change the restrictions we have as a charity, as we are already a charity.

Question 4: Would this incorporation affect the degree to which we can hold SOAS accountable?

Answer 4: No. I don't see that this would make any difference, if anything it would strengthen us as an organisation. It may give SOAS more trust to us as an organisation as we have a legal form and can provide protection to our student officers.

Question 5: Will incorporation cost more?

Answer 5: No - it doesn't cost to incorporate. If we want advice on our constitution it might cost something but we can access this through the SOAS Legal Team.

Question 6: Why hasn't the SU been incorporated until now?

Answer 6: I'm not sure if it's been something people have wanted to do, and I think there was a vote before I started here and it was tied up with other changes which students said they didn't want to make. I believe it's simply because no one has raised this before.

Amendments

N/A

Speech Against

N/A

Speeches For / Against

N/A

Proposer Summary

N/A

3. Motion 2: Declaration of a SOAS Housing Emergency

Proposer Introduction

Oscar: There's a housing crisis at SOAS. Providers are using underhand methods to try and force students to pay money for rent for housing that students currently can't live in due to the pandemic. I'd like the SU to stand behind the rent strikers and provide any materials or support they need. This emergency would also tell the School their housing is currently affecting students negatively. SOAS don't see housing as a key point in their retention scheme and many SOAS students claim housing to be a reason they are unhappy. Over £1bn has been spent by students across the UK on unused accommodation right now. SOAS out source their housing to many different contractors - this leaves students in halls more vulnerable. I'm calling the School to be more transparent and open to find better solutions. Demand these students shouldn't pay rent on rooms they don't live in. SOAS lied saying you'd be back in term 2 and that's caused students to take housing contracts they cant live in or fulfil.

Questions

Question 1: I think this is a good motion and that the SU shows support for the rent strikes. Students have linked it to the marketisation of HE. Could the motion also express solidarity with the WTFEES campaign?

Answer 1: Absolutely. Marketisation sees students being treated as cash cows by private companies.

Question 2: How would this be able to materially support students?

Answer 2: Commits the SU to support students across the next 3 years. This could be funds from the campaigns budget, time from the SU officers to facilitate work on this strikes, etc.

Amendments

Abel: 3.5:...and back the demands of the SOAS WTFEES campaign

Questions:

Question 1: Can you explain how WTFEES relates to the SOAS Housing emergency?

Answer 1: This issue between marketisation and contractual relationships and housing is a wider political issue SOAS needs to organisation around.

Argument Against:

For/Against:

Against: I don't know the exact demands of the WTFEES campaign so I don't know what I would be agreeing to, and I think it may be more effective as a singular motion for another UGM

Mais: SOAS WTFEES is more than a fees campaign - it looks at the current conditions under covid and includes fees, but also links to a wider UK campaign about the marketisation of HE. There are multiple points in the campaign where it seeks to address the plight of international students, including how students were promised blended learning so came to the UK and paid for accommodation but that wasn't fulfilled. I do think it's related. Negotiations should overlap quite a lot with that of the rent strike campaign.

Vote:

For - 21, Against - 2, Abstain - 1

The amendment passes

Speech Against

N/A

Speeches For / Against

N/A

Proposer Summary

Oscar: Wanted to get this motion out to make people aware and rally the SU around this. I would welcome the amendment as this is all linked.

4. Motion 3: Solidarity with the Uyghur People: Stop the Genocide

Proposer Introduction

Maxine: Genocide is described by acts such as: forced sterilization, brainwashing, etc. There is currently an ethnic cleansing of a majority muslim population. Our motion aims to direct our efforts to kickstart a nationwide campaign. We believe the SU should take an official stance and condemn the actions of the Chinese state, by accepting this motion and sending a letter to the Chinese consulate. We'd also like the SU to collaborate with our Solidarity society and other campaigns we've been working with. An important part of this campaign is confronting and challenging global campaigns - we want to demand SOAS investigate its investments and holdings that might be going on in the regions - divest or use them as leverage to demand worker rights. We hope to raise awareness and have open discussions.

Questions

N/A

Amendments

Chanmeet: *Remove 1.4 referencing sinophobia*

The title of the motion says ... but in 1.4 it says "rising sinophobia in the UK" which I agree with but that's due to anti-China propaganda perpetuated by the West. I don't think that this point should be included in the motion.

Questions:

Question 1: Have you read resolution 3.7 as this addresses this point. I think what you're saying is an issue but by siding with 1 imperialist power over another doesn't help to combat the rising sinophobia. Our solidarity should be with the people being oppressed

Answer 1: The people and the state are considered as 1 in China. We should get rid of this point as the title says this is a solidarity motion, but there isn't really a genocide.

POI: When we speak about sinophobic prejudices we're not only referring to what's happening because of the pandemic but about the Chinese students campaigning for the uyghurs.

Against:

For/Against:

Vote:

For - 3

Against - 19

Abstain - 4

Amendment Falls

Speech Against

N/A

Speeches For / Against

Against: Important to define what a genocide is... if its a genocide why is the Uyghar population rising?

[The speaker was cut off by the Deputy Chair and Chair for breaking the UGM Ground Rules]

For: Just wanted to clarify that when we go about using the word genocide we dont get our definition form the Oxford dictionary we get it from the UN Convention. It defines any of the following acts as genocide - killing members of the group, causing bodily harm to members of the group, etc. Most of these have been seen within the Uyghur community. It's important to pass this motion so SOAS isn't complicit in the suffering of the Uyghurs.

POI: I'm not sure if this counts as point of information, but could one of the panellists clarify for the rest of the room that the Oxford def of genocide is not an accurate umbrella definition

POI: Natural population growth in Xinjiang has declined dramatically; growth rates fell by 84 percent in the two largest Uyghur prefectures between 2015 and 2018, and declined further in 2019

POI: First, the crime of genocide is characterised by the specific intent to destroy in whole or in part a national, ethnic, racial or religious group by killing its members or by other means: causing serious bodily or mental harm to members of the group; deliberately inflicting on the group conditions of life calculated to bring about its physical destruction in whole or in part; imposing measures intended to prevent births within the group; or forcibly transferring children of the group to another group.

Proposer Summary

Maxine: It's important to reiterate this motion is not anti Chinese - we stand in solidarity with the Chinese people but we condemn the actions of the Chinese state.

5. Motion 4: Introduce a Student Parents' Officer to SOAS SU

Proposer Introduction

Sara: I'm Sara Lloyd-Knibbs, my pronouns are she/her, and I am the elected Mature Students Officer this academic year.

This motion has been developed in consultation with a group of around 30 parents who are currently studying at SOAS. One of them has seconded this motion, however they have asked that I introduce it to the Union.

Student Parents are a distinct demographic with distinct concerns and needs as a result of their personal circumstances;

Due to current circumstances (school closures and homeschooling due to the pandemic), many Student Parents have reported facing extreme and urgent challenges and barriers in accessing education, highlighting the unique nature of their dual status as both students and parents.

However, Student Parents will always face additional and distinct challenges as a result of balancing parental responsibilities with their studies at SOAS, and our Union has a responsibility to facilitate their wellbeing and access to learning;

We believe that the people advocating for the needs are student parents and we therefore would like a student parent officer added to the SU Executive COmmittee. This motion also mandates the Union to elect for this position at the earliest opportunity. This motion also calls SOAS SU to actively consult with student parents to actively consult with student parents on how to make a success of this role.

Questions

Question 1: Do you have any statistics on how many student parents exist in SOAS?

Answer 1: I don't as students don't have to report it. I do know at least 30 students have currently joined a support group for student parents.

Question 2: How many part-time officers does the charity commission suggest?

Answer 2.1: The charity commission doesn't mind how many pt officers we have. At the moment our officers are trustees also - the commission doesn't mind how many trustees we have. This motion would also go to our trustee board if passed and we could discuss if all officers would be trustees.

Answer 2.2: It's deliberately left ambiguous in the motion as a student parent may not want to be a trustee too.

Amendments

Hasan: Remove 'Carers' from the ' Disabled Students & Carers Officer' and combine it with this role, to be 'Student Parents & Carers Officer'

Also mindful we have a Disabled Students & Carers Officer and my understanding is other unions don't combine disabled students and carers - likely due to distinct needs for the two groups. Other unions may have parents and carers officers. I think carers hasn't been included in this motion as it is in another officer role.

POI: The current Disabled Students & Carers Officers are not in favour of this amendment, it was discussed in consultation

POI: I (the current Disabled Students & Carers Officer) discussed this with Sara and I didn't say if I was either for or against. I have a concern about putting carers next to parents might infantilize disabled students to a certain extent.

Questions:

Question 1: Does this motion mean that the first motion would have to pass for it to go through as this officer would preferably not be a trustee?

Answer 1: N/A

Question 2: I feel this amendment requires we write the whole motion again as it's calling for changing a current officer and the creation of a new position. Can this be integrated into the way the motion is written right now?

Answer 2: N/A

Argument Against:

For/Against:

Vote:

For - 4
Against - 5
Abstain - 6

Amendment Falls

Speech Against

N/A

Speeches For / Against

Against 1: The motion is fantastic in spirit and I support representation for this group, but the way it's written isn't consistent. Adding a role which isn't a trustee role is against the constitution. We'd need to have a UGM quorum of over 80 for this to pass. This can't also be seen as an inconsequential amendment. This and the next motion need to be raised in a constitutional quorum. I don't believe this would be constitutional.

Against 2: I'm not against the motion but just how it's being presented. As per above.

Clarification: Quora is being addressed at the point of voting, and so we can hold this meeting, but we won't be passing anything until the vote. There is no quora for amendments.

For 1: I'm a student parent, I have 3 children. It's really difficult for student parents to understand what's going on in SOAS - we're more isolated. We have different priorities, and it's more difficult for us to plan to attend meetings like this. We have very specific needs - e.g. mit circs is 28 days but children have been off school for 2 months. I think this officer role would be vital to many students in my position.

For 2: I want to reinforce that I think this is an important motion and its important to pass it in this UGM as things take a while to implement. This is a group that we need to serve and we need to mandate support for them as soon as possible. This is an urgent motion and I feel people should support it for that reason.

Proposer Summary

Sara: This motion is about mandating the union to begin the process of creating a student parents officer and getting someone into that role as soon as possible. I feel its phrased in such a way that the Exec / Trustees can interpret and implement it as best as possible according to our constitution.

6. Motion 5: Introduce a Part-Time Students' Officer to SOAS SU

Proposer Introduction

Sara: Part Time students are underserved under our current Exec Committee structure. Part Time students face different challenges in the way their academic and personal lives are balanced, and these aren't considered by SOAS. e.g. if someone is doing their masters studies over 2 years they still only have the same amount of time for their masters. I don't feel we can adequately represent part time students without a part time student being represented on our executive committee. Therefore i propose we should have a part time students officer on our exec committee.

Questions

Question 1: From an organisational perspective a lot of other unions combine mature and PT officers into one role. My question is: Why is there a distinct need for a Part Time Officer as opposed to combining this with Mature students?

Answer 1: The reason I proposed both of these motions in a similar way, in my capacity as Mature Students Officer this year I've felt there's an unrealistic workload for me to support all of these sub groups and to advocate for experiences I don't have. I struggle to understand what things are like from their perspectives - other people could better advocate for them, and they could be taken more seriously at meetings with the university as the university prefers to hear from somebody who self identifies from the group being discussed.

Amendments

N/A

Speech Against

N/A

Speeches For / Against

N/A

Proposer Summary

Sara: Want to make sure Part Time students are represented in the union decision making structures

POI: Due to the pandemic our Trustee Board was required to make a decision on how we can make our democratic processes work online. The Trustee Board made a decision on how UGMs would work, and this is something that the Charity Commission has enabled charities to do on the basis of the current pandemic.

Yesenia: There were emergency motions put forward however looking at the motions and speaking to the SU I do not deem them to be emergency motions (as described by the SU Constitution) and that they can be addressed in the next UGM meeting.

7. Executive Committee Reports

There were no questions raised for the Executive Committee based on the Officer Reports uploaded.

8. Ratifying the Minutes of the Previous UGM

Oscar Ward volunteered ratify the minutes from the previous meeting,

9. AOB

Charli: After looking through the Trustee minutes and Exec minutes and the Constitution personally I don't feel comfortable that this has been Constitutional or that anything from this meeting should pass. When it went through Trustees the conversation was that we recommend to hold UGMs online but there was nothing about how to do this online. As far as I'm aware in the Constitution we can't vote online.

Chair: The decision was made December 2nd in a Trustee Board.

[The SU will be putting out a statement explaining the decision made, and why the meeting is constitutionally abiding]