

Administrative Response to the Report on the Student Societies Summit

Introduction

My office received the Report on the *University of Toronto Student Societies Summit* on April 14, 2014. The Report, written by the faculty leaders of the Summit, Professors Donald Ainslie, Joe Desloges, Graham White and Linda White, contained a number of recommendations.

I wish to thank the faculty members for committing their time and expertise to the Summit process, and to congratulate them on producing such a thoughtful Report. The Report has been of great use to me and my colleagues, as well as to the members of Governing Council. I also wish to thank the student participants in the Summit and to acknowledge their commitment and thoughtful contributions. Their experiences and opinions were crucial in the Summit discussions and ultimately in the recommendations brought forward. The Report was posted on the Vice-President and Provost's website at www.provost.utoronto.ca/public/reports.htm and comments were invited from the University community. I would like to thank those who provided written comments.

I have considered the Report very carefully and have taken into account the wide range of comments received. At the time the Report was issued, I undertook to present a formal "Administrative Response" to Governors this Fall. This Administrative Response is divided into the following segments:

- i) background on the range of student organizations at the University of Toronto, focusing on "student societies";
- ii) key principles underlying the recognition and operation of student societies;
- iii) identification of the major themes in the Report; and,
- iv) response to those themes, including recommendations for next steps.

Student Organizations at the University of Toronto

More than 80,000 students attend the University of Toronto, across three campuses, in 18 faculties, 7 colleges and in thousands of courses – full and part-time, and at the undergraduate and graduate levels. Our students express an incredibly diverse range of interests in the classroom and also in a huge range of co-curricular and extracurricular activities. Many of these interests and activities are conducted in groups. Student organizations, in all their variety and complexity, are part of the very fabric of our University.

Students engage in a broad range of activities through many groups. Some groups are informal, ad hoc, and always evolving. Others have more structure, are ongoing, and are recognized and supported in different ways by the University and students themselves. By means of the *Policy on Recognition of Campus Groups*¹, Governing Council has provided some principles that must apply for campus groups to be recognized and supported. Noteworthy in this Policy are several, related themes:

- the autonomy of recognized campus groups, including their freedom of speech;
- the principle that being “recognized” as a campus group, which can bring with it various benefits, including financial support, is a privilege that carries with it certain responsibilities; and
- constitutional protections and expectations to ensure effective operation.

Groups that have a broader constituency and a more formal structure include “student societies” which are defined in the Governing Council’s 2003 *Policy on Compulsory Non-Incidental Fees*. This Policy defines each such group as:

“an organization on whose behalf the University collects a compulsory non-academic incidental fee, in which membership is automatic and determined by registration in a particular division or program, or in one of a number of divisions or programs of the University of Toronto. In the case of a residence student society, membership is determined by residency in a particular University residence.”

Student societies, and in particular those whose members are also members of the University of Toronto Students’ Union (UTSU(SAC)), were the focus of the Summit.

Finally, a few such student societies have special status, derived from the authority that exists in the *University of Toronto Act* for the University to recognize a representative committee of the students, to act as the voice of the students in dealing with the University. Pursuant to this authority, several broad representative committees, sometimes called “student governments”, have been recognized by the University: UTSU(SAC), Scarborough Campus Students’ Union (SCSU), Graduate Students’ Union (GSU), and Association of Part-Time Undergraduate Students (APUS). Each one is a representative committee with a broadly-based constituency, reflecting the fact that the University currently has 12,000, 40,000 and 11,000 undergraduates at UTM, St. George, and UTSC respectively, as well as large cohorts of graduate students and part-time students.

¹ *Policy on Recognition of Campus Groups*

www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppmay251993.pdf

Towards 2030 anticipates that the University will continue to evolve and grow, thereby reinforcing the need for these broadly-representative categories of student representation. This evolution has occurred in University governance as well, as the recent successful introduction of Campus Councils at UTM and UTSC demonstrates.

Principles Concerning Student Societies

Some of the key principles related to the operation and recognition of student groups have been mentioned above in relation to the *Policy on Recognition of Campus Groups*. In this section, I wish to elaborate a bit further on student societies in particular.

A consistent principle underlying the recognition and operation of student societies is their **autonomy**. The University affirms the rights of student societies to operate independently and without interference from the University in their day-to-day operations. This autonomy promotes many positive outcomes, including diversity of views, effective advocacy and representation of their constituents, and opportunities for students to engage in and operate their own service-oriented organizations.

Student societies are part of the University of Toronto community. They are recognized by the University because of their essential role in serving our students. Membership in these societies is automatic and determined by registration. These organizations are supported by substantial fees deducted on a compulsory basis. For example, UTSU(SAC) receives fees from students totalling upwards of \$16 million annually. The *Policy for Compulsory Non-Academic Incidental Fees* reflects the University's desire to ensure resources for student societies and the important activities they carry out on behalf of students. Understandably, students have expressed the reasonable expectation that such student societies operate in an "**open, accessible and democratic**"² manner – a requirement that is explicitly stated in the above-noted Governing Council Policy.

Students in divisional societies, colleges, and professional programs have asserted a need for greater input into how student society fees are allocated and spent. This is part of the ongoing evolution of student voices on campus. Students have also demanded greater assurance that the organizations they fund are serving them in a manner that is open, accessible and democratic in reality, and not just on paper. Disputes between students and their societies have occurred with regularity over recent years; this is a matter of record and was one of the reasons that the Student Societies Summit was convened. Such disputes indicate a strong interest on

² The *Policy for Compulsory Non-Academic Incidental Fees*,
www.governingcouncil.utoronto.ca/Assets/Governing+Council+Digital+Assets/Policies/PDF/ppsep232003.pdf

the part of students in ensuring that their societies are democratic. Healthy democracies evolve to meet the needs of their constituents, and sometimes disputes can be a catalyst for change.

The following are key principles pertaining to the elections for and operations of student societies. I have included them here to assist in some of the consultations that will follow this Administrative Response.

1. **Representativeness, Autonomy and Democracy**

The University of Toronto's legislation uses the word "representative" when it describes the committee that gives voice to student interests in dealing with the University. This concept of representativeness is embedded in concepts used in policies as the *Policy for Compulsory Non-Academic Incidental Fees*. **Representativeness** may be understood to have two meanings here: the committee or student organization 'represents' the interests and aspirations (the voice) of its members to the University's governance and administrative structures; the student organization also 'represents' the student constituency more generally in being responsive to the interests of that constituency.

In order to represent students effectively, the student organization enjoys a degree of **autonomy**, otherwise it would not be in a position to identify, attend to, and represent the concerns of its student members. University policy recognizes the principle of autonomy of student groups. The University enables the establishment of campus groups but does not require them, nor does it predetermine their character and focus.

In order to represent students legitimately, the student organization must be **democratic**, otherwise there is no way of knowing whether it is fairly responding to the needs and concerns of its members. Moreover, without democracy there is no clear way in which an organization can be held accountable by its members if it is not responding to their interests. A democratic organization is one which is open to the full participation of its members, whose leadership is elected freely and fairly, which reflects the views of its members conscientiously, and which is transparent and accountable to the membership for its conduct.

2. **Openness and Accessibility**

In addition to satisfying the principle of democracy, the *Policy for Compulsory Non-Academic Incidental Fees* framework also makes it clear that the societies must operate in an open and accessible fashion. The principles of openness and accessibility are directly related to the principle of democracy because only under conditions of openness and accessibility is a democratic procedure meaningful.

Openness refers to the quality of transparency or willingness to share relevant information freely. Organizations that are open, share information that may be relevant to decision-making. Openness is critical to democracy because it makes available information that affects choices. Without openness, choices run the risk of not accurately reflecting the preferences of the members. Moreover, openness carries with it the connotation of allowing voices (both individual and those expressed by coherent groups sharing common interests) to be heard. **Accessibility** is another principle closely related to democracy. It refers to the quality of being open or available to members of the organization. It therefore entails processes, electoral and otherwise, that encourage the widest possible participation including the participation of persons with disabilities.

Major Themes of the Report

The context in which the Summit took place consisted of “the ongoing disputes between some of the divisional full-time undergraduate student societies regarding distribution of student fees and democratic reform”. This context informed the identification of student societies who were invited to participate, and explains why, for example, GSU, APUS and SCSU were not invited to participate at that time.

The Summit process fostered a very fulsome exploration of many issues flowing from the context of the disputes among some student societies over the last several years. I am satisfied that the process allowed for broad participation, notwithstanding the eventual decision by UTSU(SAC) and the University of Toronto Mississauga Students’ Union (UTMSU) to withdraw.

There is no question that the Summit provided a forum for students to hear each other’s views and engage in constructive dialogue. For this, I am grateful to all participants, not just to the faculty members who led the Summit. The Report reflects the robust discussion that occurred and the substantial consensus that was reached on some (but not all) items. The Summit process helped to articulate in a more coherent and organized form a wide variety of concerns that have been expressed by many students over many years, with increasing intensity in the past several years. This is perhaps one of the most beneficial results of the Summit.

I strongly urge Governors and all members of the University community not to ignore the very real, and forcefully expressed, concerns identified by many students. The status quo is not, in my view and the view of the rest of the University Administration, an acceptable option. That said, recommendations and next steps are open for discussion and debate. My office will undertake a substantial process of consultation about recommendations for next steps following this Response.

My assessment of the Report's recommendations confirms certain broad themes that align with the key principles of autonomy, and open, accessible and democratic operation. Because of the intertwined nature of the issues discussed in the Report, some of the themes go beyond the context mentioned above, and acknowledge the interests of other student societies, including those who might wish to form (and seek recognition of) new student societies.

In identifying the three "broad themes" that follow, I have not simply repeated the Report's recommendations. Rather, I have endeavoured to identify common elements that run through the fabric of the Report, both in the narrative and in the recommendations. The three broad, interrelated themes are:

- a) **Enhancing the democratic operation of student societies:** The Report stresses the importance of such enhancements, while preserving the autonomy of student societies and strengthening their accountability to their members. The Report suggests that some form of student society appeals board be created to provide principled and consistent adjudication of appeals and disputes regarding whether democratic operation, as reflected in such provisions, has been maintained. The nature of such an appeals board is left open for discussion, but the suggestion is that it include students, faculty and staff. Other enhancements to democratic operation, including elections reform, are also identified in the Report.
- b) **A policy for the recognition, restructuring and evolution of student societies:** A significant problem indicated by the Report is the current absence of a policy that specifically addresses the recognition, restructuring and evolution of student societies. One of the key findings of the Report is that the current Governing Council Policy does not provide sufficient clarity regarding the relationship between the University and the societies it recognizes to represent its students, nor does it offer the Provost sufficient guidance in the implementation of University Policy.
- c) Should such a policy for the recognition, restructuring and evolution of student societies be developed, it would need to continue to provide for a few broadly-based student societies to represent students as a whole: The report raises an interesting question regarding the future scope of representation for broadly based student societies in its reference to a St. George campus first-entry undergraduate grouping – that is, whether in view of the spectacular growth and successful evolution of UTM and UTSC, the time has now come for St. George and UTM undergraduate students to be recognized distinctly so as to provide them with an effective voice. UTSU has recognized the legitimacy of this concept in 2004 when it responded to student requests for the creation of SCSU.

Recommendations and Next Steps

So, where should we go from here? On the one hand, it is clear that more work will need to be done and that further consultation needs to occur (as the Report itself indicates, specifically with respect to GSU, SCSU and APUS). On the other hand, my colleagues and I are mindful of the need to move forward expeditiously. In particular, the Report makes the following comment near the end:

“At the same time, the Summit resulted from many years of dissension within the student body. Summit participants expressed impatience at the pace of change and many of them noted that they were about to graduate and did not want to see their work at the Summit or in years prior go to waste. *Accordingly, we recommend that the consultations proceed expeditiously and that the new policy for student societies be implemented as soon as possible.*” [emphasis in original].

In light of the foregoing, my two recommendations are intended to focus pragmatically on responsive, fair, inclusionary, and expeditious ways to move forward.

1. With respect to the first broad theme, I propose to follow the Report’s recommendation that new processes (supported by a new Policy) be articulated with regard to student societies and principles of open, accessible and democratic operation. This will provide members of student societies with better tools to address cases where they believe their society, funded on a mandatory basis by students, is not adhering to these key principles. These processes will confirm the principles of autonomy as well as those of open, accessible and democratic operation.

The best approach to such cases or disputes is for societies themselves to have the internal structures and skills to resolve complaints made by their members. However, failing such resolution, there may be a need for the University to work in collaboration with students to investigate complaints that cannot be resolved at the society level.

There may also be a need for some form of review or appeal, perhaps in an “Appeals Board” that has representation from both students and the University (as suggested in the Report on the University of Toronto Student Societies Summit). Such an Appeals Board could be structured in a way that preserves the autonomy of student societies but makes them more accountable to their own members and objectively inspires confidence in their operations. Balanced representation, clear terms of reference, and a fair and transparent adjudication framework are essential factors in a potential Appeals Board of this kind. Such a structure would assure students (and the Provost) that

organizations whose membership is mandatory and whose operations are financed by compulsory fees are living up to their responsibilities.

The Provost will still need to hold ultimate discretion about whether fees should be withheld in cases where open, accessible and democratic operation is not occurring. However, the present situation – where fee withholding is ‘the only tool in the box’ – is not sufficiently nuanced to respond to the complexities of many cases. It also does not provide sufficient incentive for students to work out their own problems in a democratic fashion.

Accordingly, in the coming months, the Office of the Vice-President and Provost will engage in initial work on a draft policy and procedures that can address this theme of enhanced tools and standards with respect to open, accessible and democratic operation of student societies. As is typically the case with policy development, there will be extensive consultation with various groups and individuals to ensure a good understanding of issues, principles, and solutions. I will make a special point of consulting with GSU, APUS, and SCSU, since they did not participate in the Summit. My office will consider the feedback and specific suggestions of students as reflected in the Report, but will also be open to suggestions and new information should stakeholders wish to submit it.

Much work remains to be done, but we owe it to our students and to the University as a whole to undertake it. I am confident that together we will enhance the wonderful contributions that vibrant, open, accessible and democratic student societies make to the University community.

2. With respect to the second and third themes of the Report, I propose a longer-term approach. I wish to conduct further analysis and hear more from students and Governors about their views. For example, let us look ahead to 2030, and the further development of our three distinctive campuses. What do people think is the best way of ensuring that the broad-based student representative committee voice that underlies the recognition of UTSU(SAC), GSU, APUS and SCSU remains responsive to a University with three increasingly distinctive campuses? And what are the community’s thoughts about the unique interests of St. George and UTM undergraduates? I have received submissions periodically from what has been called the ‘St. George Roundtable’ that may be relevant here, and doubtless others will have views as well.

I intend to keep the issues raised by the second and third themes on my agenda, but to move forward in a considered, incremental way that will allow much more dialogue about a vital evolution in the fundamental structure of our student representative committees. This will eventually result in a new draft policy for governance consideration.

Conclusion

In closing, I want to assure Governors and the University community that I have considered very carefully the issues raised by the Student Societies Summit – a process I view as having been necessary and very constructive. The steps I have outlined will lead to a point where Governors will be asked to consider measures, whether in policy or otherwise, that will place our student societies on an even better footing to represent the interests of our wonderfully diverse and engaged students.

Thank you again to all those involved in this worthwhile process thus far. I look forward to hearing from members of our University of Toronto community as we move forward.