



# Minutes: Postgraduate Town Hall

Jonathan Swift Theatre, Arts Block

Tuesday January 24th

6-8pm

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## Presidents' Report

- President opens with a brief recap of previous activities which have led to the current situation i.e. that the TCD Dean of Graduate Studies had emailed all postgraduates to communicate the University Board's decision to suspend funding from the Graduate Students' Union (GSU) and re-allocate it to TCDSU. This decision was made by the Capitations Committee, as the GSU had not complied with the mandated report of their finances and concerns with the constitutionality and transparency of EGMs and Elections. The last time the GSU has submitted audited financial statements to the Capitations Committee was for the year ended August 31 2020. The GSU EGM 2021 had issues with lack of voting procedure, while this was appealed to the visitors, who suggested that the EGM was rerun, this agreement was not upheld by the GSU. The GSU is no longer a recognised body in Trinity College Dublin.
- On September 22 2022, the Board approved a mandate for Trinity College Dublin Students' Union (TCDSU) to nominate postgraduate students to attend relevant College committees at the invitation of the committee chair. TCDSU will facilitate postgraduate students in the interim — but the decisions regarding the future of postgraduate representation are in your hands. We have since run interim elections for class reps and committee positions for Graduate Students. The purpose of this Townhall is to discuss long term representation.
- Facility issues in Postgraduate spaces have also been noted by the President and she is endeavouring to fix them with the utmost haste.

## Education Officer Report on Interim Representation

- Consultation on how Classes and Disciplines were previously represented was carried out. Schedule 1, the list of all constituencies in TCDSU, was updated to include Postgraduates.
- In early December, TCDSU oversaw the Class and Discipline elections. TCDSU PG reps were given the opportunity to run for election to College Committees, and all postgraduates are able to vote for their representative. Voting concludes on Friday and successful candidates will be announced next week!
- Congratulations to everyone elected and to those who put themselves forward, it is amazing to see the passion and engagement from all of the Postgraduates.
- PG Class Rep Training will be held very soon, along with bonding and social events!

## President Report on Long-Term Representation Options

- The interim steps taken by TCDSU to preserve postgraduate representation since September are not designed to last long-term. Postgraduates deserve a sustainable model that is adequately resourced and built by consensus. After consultation with other universities and postgraduates, the TCDSU Sabbatical Officer Board has identified three broad options. These are not exhaustive, and if you have any preference or other ideas we encourage you to reach out to [president@tcdsu.org](mailto:president@tcdsu.org) or [education@tcdsu.org](mailto:education@tcdsu.org)
  
- It is important to note that TCD Students' Union can only change its own internal structures, i.e. decisions regarding College statutes or the structure of external organisations (like the GSU) are outside of our control. This means that if the postgraduate community prefers a unified/mixed approach, TCDSU will have a role to play in long-term representation. If the postgraduate community decides to pursue a separate approach, TCDSU will not have any input into what that new institution looks like or how it operates. Currently, our role is to facilitate interim representation and create spaces for the postgraduate community to decide which long-term approach it wants to take.
  
- Guiding Questions
  - Unified/Mixed or Separate Approach?
    - If Unified/Mixed:
      - How can the previous roles of 2 GSU Sabbatical Officers be filled?
      - How can PG taught be best represented?

- How can Research Workers be best represented?
- If Separate:
  - What will it look like? How will organisational and administrative labour be sourced.

### 1. Unified approach

- TCDSU enshrines both taught and research PG representation at all levels, i.e. our Class Rep and Convenor system. If this option is preferred, the specifics on what that would be subject to further discussion.

### 2. Mixture

- TCDSU enshrines representation for some groups but others operate independently, e.g. taught PGs are represented by TCDSU and researchers are represented by a separate organisation.

### 3. Separate institution - e.g. University of Limerick or previous Trinity College Dublin Graduate Students' Union (GSU)

- Postgraduates build a new institution that is independent of TCDSU, avoiding previous mistakes with oversight mechanisms. This would require a high level of administrative input and the participation of the institution's representatives in College decision-making, e.g. University Board, would be contingent on changes to College Statutes.
- If this approach is preferred, **it is important to note that TCD Students' Union can only change its own internal structures, i.e. decisions regarding College statutes or the**

**structure of external organisations (like the GSU) are outside of our control.**

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- The GSU had 2 full-time paid sabbatical officers. This Capitation funding is still available — how can this be reallocated?
    1. Full time PG sabbat dedicated to postgraduate needs. The existing Education and Welfare & Equality Officers would also support postgraduates, which would require an additional full-time officer to ensure that the workload is manageable and sustainable, e.g. Welfare & Equality Officer is split into a Welfare Officer and an Equality Officer.
      - a. Difficulty with PG full-time positions in representing PG research workers because it would be difficult to take a year off from your PhD for the role.
    2. Full time sabbat, either specifically PG or general with taught PG integrated within all aspects of TCDSU plus paid part-time PG representative positions.
      - a. Levels access to the positions for taught MSc and PhDs.
    3. There are also many other configurations possible, if you have a preference for 1) or 2), and/or have a suggestion for an alternative, please contact [president@tcdsu.org](mailto:president@tcdsu.org)
  - Further Consultation - Deadline February 13th
    - [TCDSU invites written submissions on the options listed above through this form.](#)

- If you would like to ask a question or offer feedback in-person, we invite you to meet the President or Education Officer. You can contact them at [president@tcdsu.org](mailto:president@tcdsu.org) and [education@tcdsu.org](mailto:education@tcdsu.org)
- TCDSU plans to publish a document with the Consultation Outcomes, Detailed Review and Options the week beginning February 20th. After it is published, we will invite further feedback on that.
- If there is consensus on the options listed in that document, the TCDSU Sabbatical Officer Board will begin organising a referendum for the Postgraduate Community. In March, we hope to provide the following:
  - Notice of referendum
  - Campaign Period
  - Voting procedure
  - Voting dates

## Q&A

### **Question/Comment [from attendee]:**

Strongly in favour of a unified option. TCDSU addressed long standing issues with facilities, I have done 4 masters in 3 universities and unification makes sense.

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### **Question/Comment [from attendee]:**

Commended the Students' Union for their work on postgraduate representation in recent months. Asked how many postgraduate Class Reps were elected? Noted that for PhDs the number of reps per course/discipline is not adjusted for class size. Asked why College Committee nominations were confined to Class Reps, is the election of ad-hoc part-time officers at Council an option?

### **Answer [Zöe Cummins TCDSU Education Officer]:**

Ad-hoc elections were an option — but that would have required an amendment to Schedule 10 via Council vote which would have likely led to a delay in their election. By electing Class Reps to College Committees, we have ensured that everyone elected to a college committee is accountable to Council. It is important to note that this isn't a permanent system and is designed to see us through the next 4-6 months until a long-term system of representation is established.

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### **Comment [from attendee]:**



I'm here as the Vice-President of P. In my opinion, the best way forward would be to have taught masters integrated into TCDSU and an independent representative body for PhD workers.

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**Question/Comment [from attendee]:**

In the interim, are postgraduate interests going to be outweighed by undergraduates at Council because the latter have more Class Reps?

**Answer [Gabi Fullam TCDSU President]:**

That presupposes that undergraduate and postgraduate interests are in conflict. I believe that a quality teaching and living environment are in the interest of both undergraduates and postgraduates. On that line of thought, you could also make a similar argument about conflicting Faculty interests, e.g. AHSS versus STEM, which we have never seen presented as an issue.

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**Question/Comment [from attendee]:**

Is there an additional barrier to engagement because postgraduates have to register to vote? Are there any issues with not enough reps for bigger classes/some classes not being added to Schedule 1 (the list of TCDSU Constituencies and no. reps per constituency).

**Answer [Zöe Cummins TCDSU Education Officer]:**

When TCDSU was given guardianship of postgraduates after the Graduate Students' Union (GSU) was disbanded, I secured the lists of courses/disciplines and the number of people in each one from the Academic Registry for the purpose of running Postgraduate Class Rep Elections. This is what the updated Schedule 1 constituencies were based on, and if there are inaccuracies in the lists provided I will flag that with the Academic Registry. We are working with College to secure a data-sharing agreement for future elections to remove that additional step.

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**Question/Comment [from attendee] :**

Regarding the March deadline, is there going to be a solidified plan for what the wording is?

**Answer [Gabi Fullam TCDSU President]:**

The purpose of this Town Hall is to present possible options for postgraduate representation, and get some initial feedback on those. Over the coming weeks the Sabbatical Board will work with the TCDSU Electoral and Oversight Commissions to write a detailed proposal document based on the written submissions we receive over the next couple of weeks, and feedback from our drop-in sessions. This document will be presented to the postgraduate community in March and if there is consensus on its content, it will be presented to referendum so that postgraduates can choose their preferred option. TCDSU has not yet scheduled a referendum for March. What that referendum will look like, and how it will be run, will have to stem from your reaction to the March proposal document.

## Q&A: Feedback on Specific Options

### **Question/Comment:**

PWO are of the opinion that there should be a PhD trade Union type structure, whereas taught masters will remain part of TCDSU. A separate union also addresses the issue raised earlier about postgraduate needs being outweighed by undergraduate Class Reps at SU Council.

1. **Response [from attendee]** - Devolved trade Union? Paid and accountable to the Union but separate administration?
2. **Response [from attendee]** – In most other countries, PhDs are not listed as staff so this isn't an issue at all, because they are contracted by the college and are not considered students.
3. **Response [from attendee]** – PhDs shouldn't be considered as students.

### **Answer [Gabi Fullam TCDSU President]:**

Gabi clarified what PWO has said. What is the logistical role of TCDSU in PhD rights defence here at Trinity while PWO is not legally recognised as a workers union, but would still benefit from representation at senior levels of decision-making in college?

4. **Response [from attendee]** – Safer with TCDSU right now due to the status of recognition, would the aspiration to join the TCD staff union?
5. **Response [from PWO reps in attendance]** – Yes we are actually working on that! We aim to set up a trade union-like organisation because the goal is to have PhDs recognised as workers at state level in the coming years, so there

is no point in integrating them into TCD Students' Union if that will have to be changed again in a few years time.

6. **Response [from attendee]** – I worked as the TCDSU Part Time Environmental Officer as an undergraduate, then I did a taught masters here, now I am a PhD. Agree with the PWO perspective, i.e. taught masters are integrated into TCDSU with a separate PhD organisation to represent researchers.
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**Clarification [Gabi Fullam TCDSU President]:**

So it seems that what you are proposing is a Mixed System. That opens up a discussion about whether a PhD workers' union could ever be a capitated body of the College with associated representation at decision-making bodies because capitation funding comes from student fees.

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**Clarification [Zöe Cummins TCDSU Education Officer]:**

It is worth noting that TCDSU cannot decide what a separate trade union will look like, we only have control over what happens within our own framework.

7. **Response [from attendee, directed at PWOreps in attendance]** – I think a workers' union is a great idea! But how does someone check what you're going to do, i.e. the GSU collapsed? Who can stop that happening if that organisation is independently run?

8. **Response [from attendee, directed at PWOreps in attendance]** – Is the goal here to have representation in decision-making? What do you see between now and establishing a trade union? Is it in your interest to currently be in the committees where workers rights are being discussed?
  9. **Response [PWO reps in attendance]** - A lot of our scope is directed into things like unpaid teaching and interim integration into TCDSU. We have been encouraging a lot of our class Reps to run for interim college committee positions. They have gone through taught masters and can voice the needs of both sides of the coin. People are just happy that there is progress being made and that representation is coming back.
  10. **Response [PWO reps in attendance]** – I didn't mean it has to be under a SIPTU trade union but it would operate as a trade union, e.g. we don't need an Ents officer we just need different supports like mediation systems between researcher/supervisor or copyright rights.
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**Question/Comment [Gabi Fullam TCDSU President]:**

Do you have thoughts on postgraduate taught students being integrated into TCDSU? There is precedence, e.g. integrated masters are already part of the TCDSU. There are also questions about how postgraduate facilities like the Reading Room or the Common Room will be administered, i.e. right now taught and PhD postgrads both use them. If we split into a mixed system, who will be responsible for facility upkeep?

11. **Response [from attendee]** - I would like to see a separate officer in the union for taught masters, which is mostly the same as undergrad until you hit summer when you have to write a thesis. Taught Masters would need additional support for that and would benefit from a specific officer. Am I right in saying that TCDSU does not operate as much over the summer?
12. **Response [from attendee]** - If you're moving taught PGs into TCDSU would you move Union Forum elections to First Council so that MsC students can run? Just to note that Sabbatical Officers hand over to the next person in July, and work full-time during the summer.

**Clarification [Gabi Fullam TCDSU President]:**

Would you see a separate officer as a full-time paid sabbatical role, a part-time paid role, or a voluntary position? It is important to flag that all undergrads start in September — but taught Masters' start across three separate times. There is a lack of uniformity in the student base in representational periods which complicates election logistics, etc., but it seems like taught Masters' needs call for a dedicated position?

This leads to questions about when that person would be elected.

It is also true that a TCDSU President, Ents Officer, etc. could easily be a masters student for example. We have been operating on the assumption that only undergraduates run for existing sabbatical positions, but postgraduates are also able to run! If we're doing away with that undergraduate/postgraduate distinction in the TCDSU Sabbatical Officer Board that raises the question of what a dedicated PG role would look? All I've done this evening is ask more questions sorry!

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**Clarification [Zöe Cummins TCDSU Education Officer]:**

The March proposal document, and any ensuing referendum isn't the end. It will take months to set up the new structure and will require a huge amount of buy-in from the postgraduate community.

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**Question/Comment [from attendee]:**

The research element for taught masters is usually in the summer. Can the dedicated PG do handover in early autumn after the masters research takes place?

13. **Response [TCDSU Education Officer]** - Yes! Absolutely - at the moment this is all flexible and you can make it look how you want it to look.

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**Question/Comment [from attendee]:**

What has the college done if they haven't given you the money? Why didn't they step in to look after postgraduate representation?

**Response [Gabi Fullam TCDSU President]:**

The college likes to give the student union's autonomy because if something goes wrong they aren't held responsible, but equally, our strength as a union comes from our autonomy and that is something we need to preserve.

14. **Response [from attendee]** – Surely the interim rep election would have fallen on the Dean of Graduate Studies?

15. **Response [Zöe Cummins Education Officer]** – Yes, that happened. There are mandates for schools to have a postgraduate representative at meetings, so when the GSU disbanded prior to elections being held, the Dean of Graduate Studies gave schools the autonomy to elect interim reps for committees. TCDSU felt it was important that those reps were elected democratically so that they had a vote at SU Council — we organised Class Rep Elections so that interim reps had the opportunity to run through the official TCD Students' Union election system.

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**Question/Comment [from attendee] :**

You mentioned that the majority of higher education institutions don't have a separate Graduate Students' Union. Trinity established the GSU 50 years ago to defend students who were working. With the coming Board reforms, students need as much representation as possible. Postgraduates have to preserve their representation.

16. **Response [TCDSU Education Officer Zöe Cummins]** - The only other university that currently has a dedicated Graduate Students' Union is the University of Limerick, which does not have a Students' Union for Undergraduate Students'.

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**Question/Comment [from attendee]:**

What will it say on the ballot paper? Have you not always represented everyone?

**Answer [Zöe Cummins TCDSU Education Officer]:**

TCDSU has always represented every Trinity student, but because the Graduate Students' Union existed, we had a Memorandum of Agreement with them where they bore the responsibility of defending and supporting postgraduates. Before this year, the odd postgraduate would come through the door. Since we became the primary representative body for postgraduates (if only on an interim basis), the casework of existing TCDSU officers has become unsustainable with the increased workload. This can't be repeated next year which is why we need to find a solution to long-term postgraduate representation. The ballot paper will present different options, and the wording will come from the consultation we are doing now.

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**Question/Comment [from attendee]:**

Can we clarify things that TCDSU can a) do directly or b) relies on College to do?

17. **Response [from attendee]** - March referendum? Is there a way to suspend things in solution so that next year's sabbatical team is mandated to pick up where you left off. Also, who's writing the Postgraduate section of the Student Partnership Policy this year?

**Answer [Zöe Cummins TCDSU Education Officer]:**

We can definitely look into mandating next year's sabbatical team to follow through on the consultation feedback and/or referendum results so that the postgraduate community doesn't have to repeat that work. Thank you for flagging the SPP — I will consult with the elected postgraduate Class Reps on that.

18. **Response [from attendee]** – Have you been keeping track of percentage taught/research casework? We need someone on board to protect postgraduate needs.

19. **Response [Zöe Cummins Education Officer]** - Yes, Chloe is mandated to to keep a casework log, so can provide those figures. I have been keeping track of how much of my casework involved students who declare that they are PG. Students are not required to disclose that information so our figures are not 100% accurate.

**[End — President, Education Officer, and Welfare & Equality Officer thank everyone for attending]**