



Student Guild of Curtin University

51st Guild Council – Special Meeting #1

Held at 6:00pm on Thursday the 6th of August, 2020

Held online, using Webex Digital Conference software.

1. Acknowledgement of the Traditional Owners:

“We wish to acknowledge the traditional custodians of the land we are meeting across, the Whadjuk people. We wish to acknowledge and respect their continuing culture and the contribution they make to the life of this university, city and this region”

2. Attendance

2.1. Members Present; Jesse Naylor Zambrano (Chair), Hana Arai, Chris Hall, Bridge Truell, Lachlan Lee, Dylan Botica, Luke Bronson, Min Dee Chia, Chris Grant, Nicola Gulvin, Jason Kim, Beatrice Panganiban, Fatma Sehic;

2.2. Others Present; David Luketina (Managing Director), Nika Velios (Minute-Secretary);

3. Disclosure of any potential or perceived Conflicts of Interest

Chris H noted that all members of the Guild Council have a conflict of interest for this meeting as members are elected at the Guild Elections.

4. Business on Notice

4.1. Elections 2020

- a) Election Methods Across other Universities
- b) High Level Summary of Guild Finances

Motion: That the Guild Council require that voting for the 2020 student guild elections (including NUS elections) be conducted using i-voting (electronic voting systems utilising the internet).

Moved by: Chris Hall (Vice President – Education)

Seconded by: Lachlan Lee (Secretary)

Chris H advised that the Guild Council requires to come to a decision on this matter. Contributing factors to this motion is the pandemic situation at hand as well as the financial implications; this is an effort to find cost cuts where possible. He noted that cost cuts are required everywhere across the Guild except for Student Assist support area.

Lachlan noted that a high-level summary was provided that illustrates the Guild's financial situation; there has been significant expenditure cuts in response to a large loss of income.

David shared that previously it was estimated that the Guild would have \$2.5million in the bank at the end of 2020, it is now estimated to be \$2million. He added that while it may seem like a lot of money, he is not confident that this is enough for the low cash flow period in June/July next year. In previous years, the Guild has been required to get an overdraft. David advised that the Guild needs to be cautious in every dollar that is spent, the \$30K for the elections can be found however it will impact what can

be done in the future. There are risks both for and against this motion and it is not a straight forward situation.

David reiterated that a decision is required very soon as documents are required to be released next week to start the election process. He encouraged the council to consider establishing contingencies should the election not go as planned.

Dylan questioned whether there were cost saving options for in-person elections. David advised there are cost saving options available, the predominant costs are the labour of staff in the booths and the Returning Officer, followed with the equipment (such as marquees) and then printing. He added that options could include having one polling booth and save in labour, use electronic ballot papers to reducing the labour in counting and so forth. Dylan further delved into how much could be saved by having in-person elections using electronic voting in the pollin booth. David responded at a rough estimate of having one polling booth and using electronic voting this could be a \$10-15K saving.

Hana shared her perspective, opinions and the different risks associated with the different modes for elections:

- The Guild is in a precarious financial situation at the moment.
 - SSAF income has been significantly reduced due to the transition to online study, and
 - The activity on campus has decreased and commercial outlets closed.
- In an effort to contextualise the references to money in the bank. The first SSAF payment is received mid-year, therefore money is required to be available in the bank to be able to operate, provide services and student experience until SSAF is received. It is not certain there is enough money to last the period until the next SSAF is acquired.
- There are a lot of unknowns at the moment and some of which could have significant effects in the vicinity of \$100K. These considerations include:
 - Differing enrolment rates,
 - On campus activity, and
 - University's decision on charging SSAF.
- No concerns towards hacking and that the software is secure for online elections. Rather, there are security risks due to unethical behaviour. The election process should be upheld to the standard of integrity.
- In person ballots and booths enables control and ensures security and safety of individuals in a number of different ways; which is not possible in an online election.

Chris H noted that voter turnout is much larger percentage in an online election. More generally, he would like to meet outside of Guild Council to discuss elections being more visual and accessible; and explore the barriers in relation to students voting in the election. Chris shared as Semester two this year is a blended learning arrangement for majority of students, there are concerns towards engagement and accessibility for physical in-person voting.

Chris G noted that he is against the changes brought forward in the motion, in person voting is more democratic and agrees with the concerns towards the integrity of the voting. He added that it is in the Guild's interest to have in person voting for the elections in the current scenario, even from a financial perspective. Chris G noted

that from a statistics perspective, it is to be acknowledged that different campuses have differing political layout, cohesion and presence. This impacts the voter turnout; as it is also dependent on the nature of the campus life.

Hana queried how an online election impacts the democracy of the situation as campaigning and other elements would not change. Chris G responded that the entire polling week would be online and therefore no in person presence or debate. This is a significant detriment. Even though there would still be one week for campaigning, it reduces:

- the ability for votes to be contested,
- discussions to occur between voters and candidates, and
- oversight over different parties (awareness over what others are saying etc.).

Chris G reiterated his main concern is around free debate to occur, of which online voting does not allow for.

Nicola shared that it is not wise to expose the Guild to the risks associated with an online election. Holding a democratic election should be one of the main priorities to ensure a democratic platform is upheld. It is not the risk of spending the money, it is taking the necessary steps to uphold the integrity of the Guild for students for the years to come. It is important to support students who need help, however it is extremely important to support students as a wider group for the years to come. If a sacrifice is required, some of the student experience events would need to be reviewed to ensure the elections are held to maintain a democratic platform and integrity.

Luke shared (given the Guild's financial situation) if students are provided the same space and opportunity to vote online, it could be a good way to save money and put it towards next year.

Jason shared that he has faith in the system and a democratic election can still be maintained. Advising that it is possible to have democratic debate online. During state or federal elections:

- the debate does not occur when voting,
- policies are published online by each party, and
- individuals are not stopped in the street.

He also added that the cohort he is surrounded by would prefer to see the limited finances available to go to better use and not jeopardise the financial stability of the Guild. Jason noted that Curtin does not have a strong culture of student politics and has low voter turnout in elections; therefore it would be low risk in hosting the voting online.

Lachlan advised that the high level financials illustrates how much budget has been reduced and/or removed from each area. He shared that it isn't fair to rip out funds from clubs, students, events and everything the Guild does for students, and then in turn spend the money on an in person election. Lachlan empathised hearing everyone's concerns and understands the risks involved. He shared that there are steps in place to mitigate the risks. No elections would ever be perfect, albeit in person does have better security. However the risk of another covid-19 wave during elections is a possibility, this could have the campus shut down. There is also the risk and likelihood for a covid-19 wave next year; the Guild would be in an in terrible financial position.

Fatma share concerns towards the current culture and accessibility and the need to maintain friendly collegial debate. She shared that to her knowledge, no one has ever said anything good about their election experience; no one enjoys the situation. Fatma reiterated that the culture around elections needs to change, it is unacceptable. Every year there are improvements, however they are not good enough. She recognises the efforts put in to alleviate the issues; more requires to be done. Whether the voting is physical or electronic, the culture requires to be looked into. It is part of the experience for both those who do and don't vote. There has been unacceptable conduct where students are harassed into voting.

Chris H agrees there is inappropriate behaviour around elections. He added that when further reviewing aspects for this motion, in person elections allow for the privacy when voting regardless of the campaigning that has occurred. An individual is able to carry out the voting process in full anonymity, without potentially having someone over your shoulder when carrying out a vote. He noted that the broader issues of the elections would still occur when online, however there is no ability for observation or reporting to the Returning Officer or polling staff. This raises a lot of concerns and also questions the integrity of votes in an online election. There have been situations where students have been taken advantage of. Instances include being:

- misinformed,
- persuaded,
- having no exposure or background to electoral processes, and/or
- forced to vote

These cannot be traced. There is bad behaviour during election and it is likely be exacerbated through online elections.

Chris H suggested to hold a physical election in a cost effective manner; the elections budget should still take a financial cut. Votes should still be done in a polling booth, this ensures oversight and observation of safety and privacy during the voting process. The full physical election in its current format is not necessary, and changes are required in any case.

Nicola noted that the Guild should prepare for a second wave of covid-19, while (with no confidence) there isn't likely to be a second wave; she would like to have faith there won't be a second wave. From a timeline perspective, the Guild elections are in a few months. Changes to borders aren't likely to occur in such a short amount of time. Nicola stated that should restrictions not be lifted by next year and there be further financial impacts on the Guild, the \$15K spent on the elections this year won't make much of a difference as it is a small amount in comparison to what would be needed. The Guild would be in a lot more strife than the \$15K cost of the Guild elections. Nonetheless and understandably, it is more money the Guild does not have, however the decision should not be based on the finances alone. She added that maintaining a strong platform for the Guild elections is much more important.

6.58pm Chris H consumed role as Chair (to allow for Jesse to collect her thoughts to speak to the motion)

Lachlan responded that he is not confident the Guild has a risk appetite to hope that there won't be a second wave. David advised that the Guild has had to slash expenditure this year in efforts to have a reasonable chance to not borrow money in June next year; every dollar counts. He added that there are pros and cons both

ways on this decision, and the Guild Council needs to weigh these up factors and come to a decision for the way forward.

Dylan queried, in a worst case scenario, the likelihood of the Guild getting a loan for the period prior to receiving SSAF and whether it would be short term. David responded that if the current scenario continues and is not disastrous, the Guild can obtain an overdraft as a standing loan until SSAF is received. If there is a second wave, there could be the scenario where campus is closed for semester one next year and the SSAF amount be significantly reduced; David is not confident on what would happen. He added that it is a highly uncertain environment going forward, and it is difficult to give an accurate prediction. David advised there are possibilities where the Guild could be in a serious financial situation and that it takes a relatively low percentage change in the Guild sales to add up to a large amount of money lost. He shared that his personal view is where there is high uncertainty, it is better to protect by being prudent now.

Dylan stated that if the Guild is affected by something that would cost \$100K, the Guild would be in that position regardless of the mode of elections; it is a small portion to reduce the chances. David agreed that it is a small amount of money in the bigger picture, however the Guild has scraped together all the small amounts of money to ensure the future of the Guild; it is up to everyone to determine their own perspective on this.

Dylan shared that wider students do not care too much; results of the poll showed this with participation rates. He continued that he had since undertaken an experiment of his own; of which did not include intimidation, did not represent the Guild or do anything unethical. The experiment largely relied on apathetic individuals, and showed that 79 out of the 200 that completed the poll were easily persuaded to change their vote. This showed the ease of targeting individuals by online means. Dylan reiterated his points expressed in the previous council meeting and concluded that the risks of online elections far outweigh the short-term money benefits; whereby saving money now does not equate to good governance. There are methods to create a more viable in person election, the broader issues of conduct and student engagement must be addressed regardless of the mode of the election.

Jesse acknowledged that there seems to be two things to consider:

- Cut funding to everything except for student support at a great cost to all the other provisions and services of the Guild; and
- Whether online elections will maintain the integrity of elections.

While funding should be cut, it should not be to the extent to hold online elections. The integrity of the elections are important and determines who gets to spend the money in the future. The decision for this is not in the context for this year only. There are risks to expose the Guild to those who are willing to abuse the system; and in turn be in power. This effects the way the Guild operates its services in the future. Jesse noted that the software itself has not been raised, as that is not the concern; the system is secure. The council needs to be conscious of what can be taken advantage of as well as look into the current known factors; such as low turnout and apathetic individuals.

Jesse commented on the two concerns raised earlier around spot campaigners on campus and voting by unlawful means. She believes that these can only be addressed by students being made aware and it being reported directly to the Guild.

This is not possible through online elections, and the Guild cannot guarantee the overall security. Jesse shared that the elections should be in person and costs cut where possible to enable this. In person elections ensure:

- there is oversight of the voting process,
- a private space to cast votes, and
- access to an officer for information.

Postal votes should be more sophisticated and a creative way to make remote voting more accessible.

7.16pm Jesse resumed role as Chair

Hana commented on Dylan's experiment, whereby it demonstrates even with the best intentions, anyone can take advantage of voter apathy. Additionally, there is the precedent of that type of behaviour with the Guild elections in the past.

Dylan shared that he was not able to undertake the test election, should such an issue occur during the elections, would voters be able to complete a declaration they are unable to use the system. David responded that he envisages that the Returning Officers would likely accept a provisional vote. The validity of the provisional vote can be checked after the polling is closed, the Returning Officer would facilitate this. Every election there are issues that result in provisional votes being cast.

Beatrice agrees with the discussions and ideas, and would like to know whether phone numbers could be used to receive the link for the elections and of which can only be stored for a limited time. In terms of determining coercion and reporting, she believes individuals do check their emails and information can be distributed around what is allowed and not allowed. Min Dee questioned how social distancing would be maintained for the elections. Hana responded regardless of the mode of elections, physical campaigning would still exist. This motion is a submission of the ballot to be online.

Chris H raised that the Guild can track open rates for emails; Orientation week and O-day have quite high open rates, however it drops throughout the semester. David shared that it does taper off after Orientation and Orientation open rates are only a fraction of the student population; a multiple pronged approach (or the like) would be used to get messages out if required. Chris H shared concerns around voter engagement, given the low email open rates. In terms of an online election, there are concerns towards a decrease in participation, the behaviour that may occur that cannot be observed, including voter fraud and coercion.

Hana reiterated that the debate is not in regards to do physical campaigning period, the debate is the mechanism for casting your vote for the Guild elections.

Chris H clarified that by having physical campaigning and a polling booth to vote ensures no one is forced to cast a ballot in a certain way, individuals have the privacy to cast the vote of their choosing. Bad practices would still occur whether the voting process is online or not. The polling booth allows for total anonymity to cast a vote; there has been blank ballots in the past due to not caring.

Dylan shared that having electronic voting within a polling booth as well as strengthening postal votes are valid alternatives. This creates less risk financially and delivers the secrecy of the ballot. This reduces the ability of intimidation tactics, such

tactics already occur and is well known to have occurred in the past in Western Australia. Dylan expressed that the third alternative to the mode of the Guild elections suggested, whereby there is one polling booth and electronic voting within the booth, will achieve the best of both worlds.

Jason queried whether the Guild Council can influence or has the ability to request the Returning Officer on the way in which the ballot is carried out. Chris H responded that the Guild Council cannot choose the way the elections are carried out in terms of the process and physical infrastructure; this is determined by the Returning Officer. However the Guild Council can recommend or suggest what is desired. Therefore, should the Guild Council elect to have in person elections, a recommendation can be put forward to the Returning Officer to uptake electronic voting for the elections. This does not mean it would be adopted.

Luke questioned what a rough cost would be to have in person voting by electronic means. David responded that having a single polling location and an online ballot process may approximately cost \$15K, potentially slightly more.

Jason queried the procedure for the student who cannot attend the campus to vote. Chris H responded that should a student not be able to make it to campus, the process would include applying for a postal ballot, information and ballots are distributed in a mail package with a returning envelope. There are specific timeframes to be able to apply and send the ballot back, these are then counted in the scrutineering process. David noted that the timeframes are based on to be able to distribute via mail in time and within the voting period.

Jason queried whether there is an opportunity to do postal voting only and what costs that would be. David commented that not many uptake the postal voting option, the highest to date for an election to his recollection has been 13 in one year. He added that the postal voting is an intensive process. Typically there are 2000-3000 votes at the elections, with mail and labour costs for such numbers of people, costs could be approximately over \$5K and up towards \$10K (at a guess). Chris H noted that there are still concerns towards ballots being stolen and individuals being forced to vote.

Bridge shared he is very conflicted in regards to this motion, and does not want to rehash all the points discussed. He understands the financial concerns raised and has seen the funding cuts to clubs and events. Bridge also acknowledged that there are a lot of students who are continuing to struggle financially and then for the Guild to hold an election that is a high cost is an uneasy feeling. He added the discussion have been of great benefit. Chris H recognised that (in any case) it should be the intention, and is integral, to make the election as cost effective as possible and there are areas where the cost can be reduced.

RESOLVED

Procedural Motion: The Guild Council recommends to the Returning Officer that the physical elections have an electronic ballot system in efforts to save on the cost of the elections.

Moved: Chris Hall (Vice President – Education)

Seconded: Luke Bronson (Guild Councillor)

Chris H expressed confidence in the Guild to establish a suitable electronic voting system to specifically reduce labour costs in the election. Luke shared that this is a good approach to mitigate the risk of individuals being forced or coerced to vote a particular way as well as a cheaper option than the current set up.

8. Next Meeting –

The next ordinary meeting of the Guild Council is Thursday, the 27th of August at 6:00pm to be held in person, with online attendance options. Documents and motions are to be submitted no later than 4pm on Thursday, August 20th to secretary@guild.curtin.edu.au.

Closed 8.05pm