

EGSA-AÉDÉ Open Constitution Forum

Meeting took place: May 9, 2013 in LMX 388

Report finalized: June 13, 2013

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Context

An open meeting took place on May 9, 2013 to launch discussions to develop a new constitution for the Education Graduate Students Association-Association d'Étudiant(e)s Diplômé(e)s en Éducation (EGSA-AÉDÉ). The meeting was designed to foster an open, transparent process for the development of a new constitution that invited all education graduate students to contribute. It was attended by eight Education graduate students, five of whom are associated with the EGSA-AÉDÉ Executive. An informal discussion was audio-recorded with the consent of all participants, loosely moderated by Catherine Vanner and Eddy Kamali.

Until this point, the EGSA-AÉDÉ has operated with a set of norms that have been developed over the years but are not institutionalized. It is a non-hierarchical organization without a President but with a series of positions chosen at the first EGSA-AÉDÉ meeting of the Fall semester. Representative positions to sit on faculty committees (Faculty Council, Educational Policy, Equity Committee, GSAED) are elected, and all other positions (Chair, Secretary, Social Events Coordinator, Academic Events Coordinator, Communications Officer, ICT Officer etc.) are agreed upon in the Fall semester but are subject to change throughout the year. Decisions are reached by consensus for the most part with those present at executive meetings. Those unable to attend can contribute to the meeting in advance through the agenda, but cannot take part in the consensus decision-making in absence. Subcommittees are frequently formed to move issues or events forward more rapidly, but the EGSA-AÉDÉ executive must affirm all budgetary allocations.

Summary

The informal discussion proceeded without an agenda and covered many issues including representativeness, transparency, elections, budgetary allocation, inclusivity, relevance, visibility and legitimacy. The following summary is organized by subject and does not necessarily reflect the order in which issues were discussed. These ideas and opinions were expressed by participants in the meeting and will be taken into account in the drafting of a new constitution but are not binding.

Relevance and Visibility

Many students do not get involved with the EGSA-AÉDÉ because they do not feel it concerns them and there is a lack of awareness about events that take place. A lack of elections contributes to the perception of a closed and exclusive environment. Part-time students feel particularly excluded and the majority of participants in the executive are Ph.D. students. Students' time is very in demand. This is particularly true for francophone students who have to sit on many committees in order to represent the francophone student body, yet there are fewer of them in total.

There is currently no space for the EGSA-AÉDÉ to post their own things. A poster board specific to the EGSA-AÉDÉ may help enhance visibility.

Elections

Discussed the possibility of holding elections at the beginning of the year to increase visibility of the organization and ownership by the student body. Possible to elect only one individual – a President or Spokesperson that would give the organization a face and provide a legitimate representative with student buy-in.

Openness and Inclusivity

All meetings are open to all graduate students to participate. One incident was raised as an example disproving this: an invitee was asked to leave as a delicate issue was being discussed. If meetings are to be open they must be so all the time, even/especially during discussion of sensitive and controversial issues.

The consensus-based and flexible approach is inviting for new students because it does not demand a time commitment, they are able to participate and then back away when busy without repercussions. It is therefore more inclusive, yet can seem less transparent, making it necessary to declare formally through a constitution.

Could make meetings accessible by distance by allowing people to tele/videoconference into meetings. CADFÉ does this and has several students participate by distance at most meetings. They find it does not take a lot more time to organize.

Consensus vs. Voting

The consensus demands consideration and deliberation not necessitated by voting; some of the participants involved in the executive feel this makes decisions achieved through consensus more thought out than decisions voted on and reflective of all views. A contradictory point was raised that the discussion that precedes a consensus decision may not really be inclusive, as it can be dominated by certain individuals with more experience with the organization and/or more outgoing personalities. Those in attendance that are unsure of the history and more tentative to speak may not have their voices heard and feel pressured into consenting to the decision. Therefore, a clear hierarchy may legitimize this view by recognizing what is already occurring.

Roles and Responsibilities

While there are definite benefits to fluidity and not forcing a commitment, this sometimes creates a situation where all the work falls to a small number of people, creating stress for those individuals. Assigned roles and mandating attendance could create a stronger sense of accountability. On the other hand, this could be a disincentive for people to participate if the option to just show up, listen and contribute is not there. We do currently have positions that are done to the best of our ability. If you take on a position you take on responsibility, yet there is

low attendance at events even from executive members. Discussed the possibility of mandating attendance at a certain proportion of meetings and events for “core” executive members, and still allowing open attendance for other graduate students.

Transparency

Suggestion to make minutes and budget accessible to all students from the website. Have meeting minutes validated by other exec members before they are posted, or make an agenda item the approval of the previous meeting’s minutes. In the latter, meeting minutes would be approved at the beginning of the following meeting. There would be a two week delay before posting minutes to the website wherein the executive would have time to review the minutes before agreeing on them and making them public. Have updates on the budget on a more regular basis and post to the website as well. Each meeting could include a mini budget update (i.e. spending since the last meeting) that could appear in the minutes.

Agendas are shared with the exec members prior to the meeting but not all graduate students. Suggestion to make agendas accessible in advance through the newsletter, or highlight a number of key things that will be discussed so students better understand what type of issues are dealt with at executive meetings.

Rumours have been spreading about our remuneration of certain activities (ex. Contribution to events, graduate lounge), despite having refused to pay for translation services. Clarified that we do not pay for services but provide honorariums/thank you gift cards. The point was made that this still puts a higher value on some services as opposed to others. Consider whether we want to continue this practice and, if so, clarify in constitution that this is our policy.

Next Steps

A subcommittee of EGSA-AÉDÉ executive members will be established to proceed with the development of the constitution, to be temporarily operationalized in the 2013 Fall Semester and finalized in the 2014 Winter Semester. The next step will be to review these notes and start developing a rough draft of the constitution. The first meeting to develop the constitution will be made open to all graduate students and invite their contributions throughout the process.