

# JCR-Cambridge SU Debate Minutes

Meeting on 09.11.2022 at 19.00 UK time

## List of Committee Members

Names, initials, pronouns and * to mark non-attendance	Role
Jamie Charles, <b>JC</b> , she/her	President
George Stokes, <b>GS</b> , he/him	Vice President
James O'Garro, <b>JO</b> , he/him	Treasurer
Jacob Hougie, <b>JH</b> , he/him	Secretary
Keelan Shorten, <b>KS</b> , he/him	Welfare
Vasilisa Grachova, <b>VG</b> , she/they *	Welfare
Ben Palmer-Welch, <b>BPW</b> , he/him *	Welfare
James Walker, <b>JW</b> , he/him	Academic and Access
Kitty Joyce, <b>KJ</b> , she/her *	Green
Yifei Zheng, <b>YZ</b> , he/him *	Catering, Accommodation and Facilities
Matthew Wadey, <b>MW</b> , he/him *	Sports and Societies
Gosia Szakowska, <b>GoSz</b> , she/her *	Ents
Muhammad Mahmoud, <b>MM</b> , he/him *	Ethnic Minorities
Neve Baskar, <b>NB</b> , she/her *	International Students
Emma Gibson, <b>EG</b> , she/they/he*	LGBTQ+
Lucy Trusler, <b>LT</b> , she/her	Gender Equalities
Malachi Gee, <b>MG</b> , he/him	Disabled Students
Dylan Mankin, <b>DM</b> , he/him*	Computing (non-voting)

## Agenda

Summary of Key Points .....	3
<b>0. Administrative Matters and Welcome .....</b>	<b>4</b>
1. Boycott Speakers – Malachi Gee, DSO; Jacob Hougie, Secretary.....	4
2. Engagement Speaker – Zaynab Ahmed, Undergraduate President, SU 6	
3. General Questions.....	8
4. Targeted Questions .....	9
5. Closing Statements.....	10

## Summary of Key Points

There was a debate over whether the Corpus JCR should boycott or engage with Cambridge SU's Student Council Meetings.

Malachi Gee and Jacob Hougie spoke in favour of boycotting the Student's Union Council on the grounds that it is often unhelpful, is poorly representative, institutionally incapable of being effective and that a boycott is a better way of achieving change than participation.

The SU undergraduate president (Zaynab Ahmed) spoke against the boycott on the grounds that Corpus students would be better represented if the JCR attended the meetings and that the SU does useful work for students, and would listen if we attended Council to make our complaints.

---

## 0. Administrative Matters and Welcome

Meeting begins at 19.07.

**GS** welcomed everyone to the meeting, explaining that the debate was about the JCR's relationship with Cambridge SU. He outlined the rules before moderating the debate.

---

## 1. Boycott Speakers – Malachi Gee, DSO; Jacob Hougie, Secretary

**MG** thanked those who had attended the debate, whether virtually or in person.<sup>1</sup> He clarified that the boycott only applies to the JCR in not having a role in the Student Council, but any Corpuscle can still individually choose to attend any SU event they're eligible for or receive support from them.

Originally, the SU was paid for directly from the JCR, with disaffiliation originally being taken as a measure to retain the money as it was the view that JCRs could better use that money. Eventually, the SU changed the payment model after lobbying the University so that now all Colleges, irrespective of their affiliation status, now directly contribute to the finances of the SU.

**Zaynab Ahmed (ZA)** made a point of information clarifying that the Student Union fees don't come out of the JCR Budgets,<sup>2</sup> but the University pays a block grant for the majority of SU expenses, with

---

<sup>1</sup> and presumably those lucky few reading this now

<sup>2</sup> which I can confirm as Treasurer

Colleges, and not their JCRs, contributing chiefly to the sexual health supplies amongst various welfare initiatives.

**MG**, as DSO, has found the SU to be rather lacking in the support they can provide to people. For example, he alleged that certain members of the student body were given inappropriate or just bad advice from the SU, noting that, despite the good intentions of most, if not all, Sabbatical Officers, the JCRs are much better equipped to support students and liaison with College on our behalf. In terms of tangible results, **MG** argues that the SU is rather lacking and that very few people that he had had the chance to speak with have even interacted with the SU or engaged with them. Concluding his remarks, **MG** hands over to **Jacob Hougie**.

**Jacob Hougie (JH)** set out his views on how the SU has failed and continues to fail to represent the students due to institutional failures. In his opinion, it tends to only support those few students who vote. For instance, the SU had taken a stance on online lectures favourable to their base, yet contrary to the interests of the student body at large. A U-turn on pushing for all online lectures subsequently followed highlighting the gap between those few who vote and the majority who do not. This is a natural phenomenon, he argued, of the fact that very few people vote in the SU elections. In fact, the current SU Undergraduate President was only elected with 1,244 votes out of roughly 20,000 students, which he deemed “terrific”. Other SU Sabbs were elected with even fewer votes. Referendums, though more popular, still have small electorates. The reading week referendum had only 4,300 votes again, a symptom of the fact that the SU is viewed as being, in his words, “*incapable of acting in our interests.*” With respect to the more polarising, political debates, such as the decolonisation drive in certain reading lists,

the SU, as a result of its niche electorate can sometimes deviate from the views of the average Cambridge student in favour of more fringe ideas. He argued that much more energy<sup>3</sup> was spent on the university's relationship with fossil fuel companies than the "*real concerns of students*" in our day-to-day lives. Ultimately, it's the JCRs who pick up this slack, especially with respect to welfare support and student wellbeing. JCRs take more initiative in food, housing, and many more things beside that either can't or aren't being tackled effectively, in his view, by the SU. **JH** argues that the SU is "*simply not capable of being effective*" which means there's "no point in engaging with the SU" as they "*simply won't listen*" so we should "*boycott to show their ineffectiveness.*" **JH**, as a member of the Jewish community, feels such groups are being left behind by the SU, such as with the placement of Fresher's Fair during Yom Kippur or hosting debates on the contentious Israeli-Palestinian conflict during certain Jewish holidays. The SU can make one feel excluded and unwelcomed.

But **JH**, energetic as always, has exceeded his time and so **GS** ends the boycott speeches.

---

## 2. Engagement Speaker – Zaynab Ahmed, Undergraduate President, SU

**ZA** clarifies her role and background. The SU is led by eight Sabbatical Officers<sup>4</sup> of which she is one. The SU supports students in a variety of initiatives. In the Student Council, where motions affecting the SU are debated and voted on, every JCR and MCR get one vote each, as does

---

<sup>3</sup> no pun was intended there I think

<sup>4</sup> full-time, paid positions

each school rep and campaign lead. Any student can attend and direct discussion. **ZA** highlights that many Corpuses already attend SU events, such as the Freshers' Fair, and has even spotted a fair few JCR Officers at their workshops and talks. The only thing that the boycott does is remove us from the council, which is in her view "*a crying shame*". The big decisions in the SU are made there, and whilst the Sabs are the day-to-day leads, they welcome their direction. In fact, the change in the policy for lecture provision during Michaelmas 2020 was a product of student outcry at such meetings, with ZA admitting that her predecessors "*had missed the mark*". As a former JCR Officer, she values the work they can do on the local level, but the focus of the SU is on the systematic changes needed across the University such as looking into the Disability Resource Centre or the University Counselling Service. As the SU sits on the Uni-wide committees, they alone can elevate the particular concerns of JCRs and students to the highest levels, which in her view "*works to the benefit of the JCRs.*" She uses as an example the extension of the University Bus to Girton and to Homerton, which was pushed forward by SU sabbs being on the relevant committees, despite the initial impetus coming from the Girton JCR. If we feel the SU is institutionally flawed or making errors, she would love our input at these Council Meetings, for she admits that "*mistakes that [her] predecessors had made*".

**James Hazell (JHz)** highlights, in a point of information, that students can attend the Student Councils and raise their concerns anyways, regardless of SU affiliation status on the JCR level.

Yet, **ZA**, would still like the input, not only of individual students, but also JCRs as well at these Student Council meetings. Corpus not engaging with the SU Council is a “*major disservice to our community*” by the JCR in her view and our view can best have effect if we take our seat at the table and vote instead of boycotting the meetings.

**ZA** finishes her remarks and **GS** ends the engagement speaker to open the floor to general questions.

---

### 3. General Questions

**Jamie Charles (JC)** - There is a growing movement amongst JCR Presidents to create an informal space to meet and discuss without the input of the SU. Why do the speakers think that it?

**MG** – It has become clear, in his opinion, that cooperation between JCRs and among JCR Presidents can do many things that the SU can and maybe even more. This is because, as the University is collegiate, many initiatives require the individual consent of each College, and since JCRs have a closer relationship to their respective College, they can often get the changes their members want much quicker than an SU campaign.

**ZA** – Finds what MG had said to be true “*to some extent*”. JCR Presidents have been affected by her predecessors where the SU seemed to try to shape agenda. Whilst **ZA** wishes the JCRs to really be in the driving seat of future decisions, the SU often does have the resources and contacts that individually Presidents and JCRs often lack.



**Daniel Starkey (DS)** – Why has turnout been so low as 19% in the recent SU elections?

**ZA** – In fairness, most other Universities have had low turnout in their own elections, even in local Government elections and **ZA** wishes for our feedback into how we can widen participation. She believes uncontested elections really suppress participation as people feel like their vote has no meaningful change on the outcome.

**JH** – Is less convinced by the relationship between the participation rate in local elections and SU elections as he feels that many more people vote in their local elections than “*any*” of the SU elections. In his view, people “*know*” the outcome before the vote count even starts due to the abundance of uncontested elections. He also raises scrutiny to the idea that the pandemic artificially lowered voter turnout on the basis that participation in local elections has returned to normal.

**ZA** – With campaigning now mostly online, a lot of the events and campaigns lacked that physical presence whilst national and local Governments have much more effective tools in reminding people about local elections. And whilst many might think SU sabbs don't do much, for some people, “*they can change lives*”.

---

#### 4. Targeted Questions

**Lucy Trusler (LT)** – [To **ZA**] What are the changes made by the SU, independent of JCRs, which improved the lives of students?

**ZA** – The SU has launched a successful campaign to remove £75 application fees for PhD applications and reduced to £50 for master's applications, with the aim to scrap them as well. This will help

undergrads as they consider the next steps of their academic journey. Another policy achievement is a drive to make May Balls and June events more accessible and yet another is to get more support and recruiting to help BME students. A future wish is to get the Cambridge Bursary to increase with inflation.

**JHz** – [To **MG** and **JH**] What is the point of JCR Officers not being at the meetings and help make these decisions?

**JH** – As a small College, we won't make much change to the overall voting arithmetic, but we can make a more forceful statement of our displeasure with the ineffective SU if we abstain. If students want to make a contribution, they are still able to attend.

**JC** – [To **ZA**] What benefit is there to Corpus students if she were to spend hours working trying to get change through the SU if, more often than not, more immediate change can be made here through College?

**ZA** – Colleges are not all Corpus and sometimes it can be better to work as a collective bloc than as separate organs of change. Also, whilst Corpuscles can attend, only the Executive Officers get the vote. She wishes the SU to be democratic and to have our input.

---

## 5. Closing Statements

**ZA** – The JCR no longer pays a fee to the SU so concerns about JCR finances are a moot point. Let the JCR have a say and make a statement. Change can be a slow burn in a system that is “*rigged against us,*” but she wants us to have a say.

**MG** – The SU is a very slow organisation, and a JCR can promise a change and get their promise made during their term, whilst SU campaigns can take years. Change happens through revolution in the most efficient way. Innovations like direct JCR communication are already showing their utility and, whilst the SU isn't totally flawed, it can't ever hope to be, in his eyes, able to match the dynamic vigour of a Corpus JCR.

**JH** – There are better ways to achieve change. We can give our full attention to the JCR where meaningful change can be made. A vote to boycott is a vote against increased bureaucracy and the diversion of time from the JCR Executive Officers to slow and maybe even “*rigged*” systems.

**GS** announces that a binding referendum will be held alongside the JCR Presidential election, and concludes the meeting at 19:56.

---