

November 2017

## Briefing on the SGPS Student Fee Policy

At the October 2016 meeting of SGPS Council, last year's VP (Finance) moved a series of motions that sought to revise and strengthen the Society's student fee policy. One of the most consequential (but least discussed) changes was increasing the threshold required for a fee to pass from a simple majority (50% + 1) to a two-thirds majority. There is good reason to support the higher threshold. With a large and expensive fee slate, a two-thirds majority ensures that fees are more adequately supported by the membership. This, it can be argued, is particularly important due to the Society's historically low voter turnout. Now, after a year in effect and with the proposed JDUC fee looming, the efficacy and practical implications of these policy changes must be examined.

In the first referendum period with the new policy, two fees failed that would have been successful through a simple majority. One attempted to establish a mandatory \$5 fee for the Queen's Clubs Office, and the second was a triennial review of a mandatory \$19.86 fee for Walkhome. The Walkhome fee was noteworthy because it fell short of the two-thirds threshold by only a handful of votes, and because of its importance to the Queen's community. Walkhome is a student-run service that provides free and anonymous nighttime walks. While the fee was expensive relative to others, Walkhome is considered an essential safety service for many students. Fortunately, the AMS (who runs the service) agreed that SGPS members could continue using the service for this academic year, in large part to keep the service anonymous. However, they have also suggested that moving forward the service could remain anonymous while restricting it to undergraduate students by checking the back sticker of student cards, which only identifies you as an AMS or SGPS member.

One assessment of the Walkhome fee's failure is that it demonstrates the fragility and precarious nature of expensive fees, regardless of the value or service they provide. This is the context in which we are now pursuing the establishment of a long-term mandatory fee for the redevelopment of the JDUC. Financially, it is in the best interests of students to support the fee. Doing so allows the SGPS to remain a managing partner of the building and, as a result, only pay for the barebones costs of our space. Should the fee fail, the SGPS would be charged premium rent in the newest building on campus, which would require a permanent increase to the SGPS Society Fee. Despite being the more cost-effective option for the SGPS and its members, the immediacy and direct cost of the JDUC student fee poses a significant challenge to its success.

The Society's consistently low voter turnout indicates an apathetic membership, which creates a real risk that even a fee that serves members' interests will fail on its price tag alone. This risk is amplified by the complexity of the JDUC redevelopment fee. One step to mitigate these concerns without adjusting the vote threshold is to hold a special referendum, separate from the other elections and referenda, specifically for the JDUC. This referendum would be held in February, to be aligned with the AMS who is doing the same. The special referendum will provide an increased opportunity to engage SGPS members. However, while the SGPS will make every effort to maximize student awareness and understanding, we must consider whether those efforts will suffice – and what the consequences of failure are.

## Key Questions

1. Is the two-thirds majority an appropriate threshold for referenda in general?
2. Does the two-thirds majority set the JDUC student fee up for failure, or is it reasonable for a fee of its magnitude?
3. Should the SGPS hold a special referendum aligned with the AMS, with the JDUC as the only fee on the ballot?