

CUSU Council: Some Suggestions

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Introduction

For some time, I have thought that the administrative side of the CUSU Council could be made easier and improved by a better use of IT. Recent innovations, particularly the wide-spread use of Raven, seem to suggest that now might be an appropriate time to implement such changes. Unfortunately, I am not sure I have all the technical skill to do so myself and therefore it was suggested that I put my suggestions in writing for consideration by people with a better knowledge of these issues.

Current Situation

Currently, the details of the membership of CUSU Council are kept as an Microsoft Excel Spreadsheet on the CUSU File-server. Changes to membership are notified, by email, usually to the CUSU Chair, who then updates the membership list (often at a CUSU office computer). The CUSU services office then updates the various mailing lists, as required. Proposed motions to the Council are also submitted by email and are then manually compiled into an agenda and voting paper by the CUSU Chair. This is then turned into a *.pdf* file which is printed for the meeting and manually uploaded to the website. Mail-merge is used to produce address labels for the agendas from the Excel Spreadsheet. If a member cannot attend, he or she can nominate a proxy, by emailing the CUSU Chair. Following the meeting, the CUSU Secretary should compile a register of those attending and a voting record. Both of these are usually Excel Spreadsheets which are then uploaded to the CUSU file-server.

Proposal

General

The general idea of the proposal is to automate as much of the above procedures as possible and to allow individual members of Council to modify their own details. This should reduce the workload for the CUSU Chair and Secretary and reduce the number of administrative problems which occasionally affect the Council. It is also hoped that more of the processes can be carried out remotely, thus reducing the amount of computer time at the CUSU Offices required to produce the papers for a CUSU Council meeting. It is envisaged all functions could be carried out on the CUSU Website (and therefore the bulk of the work would be in php).

Membership List

It is suggested that the membership list could be transferred from the Excel Spreadsheet to an SQL database. It could then be viewed and updated from the CUSU website. Using Raven, it should be possible to allow each member of Council to conduct his or her own handover (much in the same way that societies can update their details on the societies directory) by replacing their details with those of their successor. This should reduce the workload of the CUSU Chair and Services Officer. The Council Mailing List could also be able to be dynamically generated from the database every time it is used, rather than by manually updated by the CUSU Services Officer.

Submitting Motions

Rather than submitting motions by email to the chair, it is suggested that this process could be done via the website. This would require the setting up of another SQL table and some more php. A member of CUSU could log-in via Raven, and enter the text of his or her motion and the details of those seconding it (another SQL table could also include details of those in charge of a committee and so allow, for example, the "Education Officer" to select "Faculty Forum" as a seconder, or the "CUSU Chair" to select the "CUSU Executive"). An email would then be sent to those listed as seconding it (if they are individuals), asking them to log-in and verify their consent. The basic details would then be entered into the SQL table (e.g. Motion Name, Unique ID Number, Date of Submission, Nature (e.g. "normal", "constitutional change", "standing order change", "vote of no confidence" etc.), Proposer 1, Proposer 2, Seconder 1, Seconder 2, Meeting at Which it Will be Discussed, Number of "Notes", Number of "Believes", Number of "Resolves", Passed/Failed/Requires Second Vote, Date of Expiry). At the

moment, it seems most sensible to have each section of the motion text saved as a separate plain text file (so the text of "Resolves 3" of a motion with the Unique ID of 33 might be saved as 33N3). The details stored in the database would then easily allow it be reconstructed and formatted as desired.

Generating Council Papers

The information in the motion table should then allow the council agenda and voting papers to be automatically generated. When the deadlines close, the Chair could log into the website. This would allow him or her to enter details about the time, date and venue of the meeting. He would also be able to add information about any elections and edit the agenda points which are before and after the motions are discussed (e.g. "Questions to the Executive", "Objections to the Order Paper" etc.). Once all of this is completed, the papers could be built from the plain text files. Those for mailing would probably be generated by an external package (e.g. Latex) so that they would be properly formatted for printing. They could also have the mailing addresses inserted automatically from the membership table (this would make it relatively easy to add manual adjustments if necessary). A plain text version would also be made and emailed out to the Council list and an HTML version could be constructed and automatically added to the website. Voting papers could also be easily generated.

Proxies

Council Members could log-in to the website to nominate a proxy. This could then be emailed to the Chair.

Amendments and Emergency Motions

It is probably easiest if amendments and emergency motions continue to be submitted directly to the chair (as they can be submitted orally at the meeting, in the case of the former, or at any time until the meeting starts, in the case of the latter). Therefore, the Chair should be able to amend motions following the meeting or add the details of emergency motions. Both of these should be fairly straight-forward to implement.

Following the Meeting

The final function would be to allow the Secretary to record the details of the votes. A web-form could be generated with the details of each Council Member and details as to whether that person recorded a vote in favor, against or abstained. Once submitted, these could be counted to see whether a motion

passed or failed. Attendance figures could also be generated from this (on the assumption that if someone does not vote, then he or she was not there) and added to the website. Finally, the “resolves” sections of passed motions could be generated into a policy document on the website. Details of motions about to expire (usually after three years) could also be automatically sent to the DPC list as the DPC is responsible for resubmitting and old motions which they would like to implement.

Conclusion

These are just some rough notes about the idea and will obviously need quite a lot of work to finalise before we could even consider implementing them. Indeed, it is debatable whether such changes are even warranted. However, I do think that CUSU should make better use of technology to assist its running and projects, such as the new website and societies directory, show that such ideas can be of benefit. If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me at: education@cusu.cam.ac.uk