



UWSA

THE UNIVERSITY OF WINNIPEG
STUDENTS' ASSOCIATION

UWSA Reforms Final Report

March 8, 2021



INTRODUCTION

This report to the UWSA general membership provides background information on the incidents that occurred in 2020 at the UWSA that highlighted the need to restructure the organization. It includes recommendations made by an external consultancy firm, [Catalyst Research and Communications](#), to facilitate the process and the resulting reforms implemented by the UWSA.

SUMMARY OF EVENTS

In June 2020, former UWSA Executives Mahlet Cuff and Noelle Sagher, released social media statements sharing their experiences of harassment, discrimination, and misogyny during the 2020 UWSA General Election with the 2020/21 Executive team (Jibril Hussein, Melanie William, and Breanna Belisle), their connection to David Teffaine and Sam Cohn, and the UWSA Chief Election Commissioner.

On June 8, racist pictures of Teffaine surfaced online and in the news. On June 9, the former 2020-21 Executive team and the UWSA [released a statement](#) saying the Executive Team was “shocked, disturbed and disgusted” by the photo of Teffaine referred to above, and reiterating that the UWSA does not condone racist conduct of any kind and publicly discontinued any relationship with David Teffaine.

[Between June 12 – 16, 2020](#), the UWSA Board of Directors approved a motion to send a formal request to the UWinnipeg Human Rights and Diversity Office (HRDO) to investigate the above mentioned experiences of harassment and discrimination and put the Executive team on paid administrative leave until the investigation was completed.

The University was unable to investigate because their Policy does not allow for a complaint to be brought forward on behalf of another party, and because the issue fell beyond its jurisdiction. The UWSA Board recognized that it needed to address the issue at a deeper, organizational level and hired an external consultant from [Catalyst Research and Communications](#) to engage in a restorative justice process which allowed the UWSA to examine its strengths and weaknesses, and recommend a path forward for the organization.

On August 5, 2020, former UWSA 2020-21 Executives, [Jibril Hussein and Breanna Belisle](#) [tendered their resignations](#). The former UWSA Executives cited that the decision was made out of “caution for their mental and physical health and to recover from the trauma” and stressed “concern for the safety of family and friends due to direct violent threats by many students on and off campus.”

On October 15, 2020, [the UWSA released a statement](#) outlining some emerging conclusions, where we acknowledged the need to increase transparency, encourage safe and open discussions, and address racism and oppression. The UWSA Board also invited the 2020-21 Vice-President Student Affairs, Melanie William, back to her position for the remainder of her elected

term. In the spirit of reconciliation, the board and executives, including resigned members, agreed to come together in a sharing circle to learn from their collective experiences.

On January 27, 2021, The Board accepted and ratified the [resignation of the 2020-2021 UWSA Vice President of Student Affairs, Melanie William](#).

Over the past few months, the UWSA has been working to implement some of the reforms recommended by [Catalyst Research & Communications](#) to restructure its bylaws and policies. One of the ways that the UWSA committed to harm reduction is to restructure the elections process to make it safer for candidates and voters.

To ensure that the harm done during the 2020 General Election is not repeated, and work on creating an anti-oppressive election framework, the Board voted to [postpone the 2021 General Elections from February-March, 2021 to March-April, 2021](#).

On February 12, [proposed election reforms](#) were presented to general membership and students were encouraged to provide feedback through the website. This feedback was presented to the Board of Directors at the Board Meeting on February 24. After amending the by-laws to incorporate some of the feedback, an amended version of [election reforms by-laws and policies](#) was passed at the meeting.

The recommendations and reforms are listed in the report below. These changes are the beginning of a process to restructure the organization in a way that is decolonial and creates safer, non-violent spaces for discussion. A feedback process is available at the end of the report to help us continue to evolve and create a system that challenges the norm, is transparent, and resilient to outroot colonial and racist processes from our communities.

OVERALL THEMES

Following the above-mentioned incidents, [Catalyst Research and Communications](#) helped the UWSA identify the following key issues and themes to guide the organizational restructure.

- The UWSA exists to support students at the University of Winnipeg. The student body is diverse and representative of different social, cultural, and political identities. Honouring and respecting that diversity is fundamental to the UWSA in its work.
- To respect the diversity of the UWSA membership, we need to strengthen our platforms and spaces that promote dialogue and debate. We need safe spaces for disagreement, and to maintain respect for each student engaged in these conversations. When it comes to supporting racism, elections, and open discussions, the UWSA must, and can, do better.
- While social media has some value in raising issues, we were reminded that important social issues like addressing racism cannot be resolved solely through social media.
- We learned that the UWSA will need to find better ways to support Executives as they transition, particularly when they have very different ideological foundations or



approaches. We are committed to establishing a change management strategy between Executives that honours both sets of student leaders – one group transitioning out and the other coming in.

- Most Executives have ambitious agendas that cannot be achieved in their one-year term. We need to engage students with UWSA initiatives and strategies that go beyond the annual election cycle and campaigns. Many of the issues that students want to see changed are systemic in nature and take longer than one year.
- We want the election process to be focused on the strengths that our student leaders bring, instead of replicating systems and processes that are known to harm individuals. We want to get creative and constructive about our election process.
- The UWSA is committed to doing its part in ending all forms of discrimination, including Anti-Black and Indigenous racism. When accusations of racism came up, the UWSA Board took leadership to respond to the issue. As we moved forward throughout the past few months, we recognized that there are multiple strategies to address racism and many students put forward their thinking. This critical discussion deserves more platforms so that we, at the UWSA, can do better. We learned that doing harm to others does not address racism – holding people accountable through relationship is how we can all learn and change.
- We want to recognize the UWSA Board and Executive who respected the process to try and address this situation and find solutions. We would like to thank former Executives and board members who continue to participate in the process to make the UWSA a stronger organization.
- We have been reminded through these many difficult situations that relationships matter and when we work at having honest and respectful relationships we can get through any issue together.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The recommendations made by [Catalyst Research and Communications](#) are listed below:

ELECTION PROCESS

The origins of many of the issues arose from the election process held between February and March 2020. Former Executives experienced intimidation and harassment. They felt that through the actions of people related to the successful campaign, a general atmosphere was established where candidates did not feel safe. Some of the former Executive members did complain to the Chief Electoral Officer on more than one occasion.

Recommendation:



1. Define an election process for UWSA that aligns with UWSA's values. As a student union, there are options available that go beyond Canadian politics. What election system is UWSA endorsing and promoting? This is an important conversation for UWSA to lead and implement changes to support a process that does not do harm to candidates.
2. Do a mini campaign school in the Fall or January of each year where candidates can learn how to run a political campaign that does not cause harm. Some of the mini classes can be about: how to manage social media; the potential impact of social media; how to identify and address a concern throughout the election process and recognizing harmful behavior.
3. The Chief Electoral Commissioner (CEC) position needs better support to do their job effectively. Some options would be:
 - a. Divide responsibilities between a staff person and a student hired on contract.
 - b. Have the CEC contract start earlier so they are well trained and ready to deal with complex issues like harassment.
 - c. Have the CEC contract be for two years so there is stronger continuity and capacity.
 - d. Ensure that the CEC has a body they can go to for advice. Ensure that the body can respond to issues and complaints that arose in past campaigns.

ORGANIZATIONAL AND GOVERNANCE STABILITY

There are a number of significant challenges with the current governance model. A one-year governance responsibility is a very short period of time. The current election cycle of one year means that most if not all board and Executive members are new each year. UWSA staff are required to play a key role in developing and training new leaders every year. The Executive members are being elected into a position which is also a paid job. Being elected as a political leader does not necessarily ensure that the person has the skills and abilities to be effective in these important job responsibilities, including representing students through a number of formal forums. The dynamic of staff working alongside Executive members who are not performing or are underperforming can create an uncomfortable dynamic. It is not clear where staff would go if they had a performance concern.

Recommendation:

4. Consider that terms for Board members be staggered to ensure continuity of knowledge within UWSA around governance and key functions. The suggestion is that half of the Board has a one-year term and the other half have a two-year term. For the Executive, have one of the three positions be a two-year term.

5. Address some of the organizational dynamics of supporting student leaders to meet their Board and Executive responsibilities in ways that they are the leaders during all stages of their development within UWSA.

EXECUTIVE TRANSITION

Currently, the new Executive is elected in March and starts on May 1st. This transition needs to be viewed more as a “transition” period where the primary focus is on Executive changeover rather than business as usual until the new Executive comes in on May 1, 2020.

Recommendation:

6. April would be a time of transition between Executives. The focus during that time would be “files” and responsibility shift between the two Executives and training for the new Executive.
7. The week before the May 1 would be a time where there is no Executive (old or new) and the staff can transition and get ready to support the new Executive. That would include a debrief with staff on any past concerns with the former Executive and getting ready to fully support the new Executive.
8. All Executive members, newly elected and past, during the transition need to have the opportunity to debrief on their experience and if there are unresolved issues, there needs to be opportunities for mediation so that people can leave their UWSA responsibilities as a stronger leader.

ADDRESSING THE ISSUE OF COMPLAINTS WITHIN THE GOVERNANCE AND ELECTION PROCESS

The CEC had the opportunity to play a much stronger role. The role needs greater clarity about when action needs to be taken, and what action. During an election, there is no Executive or Board to deal with situations like this, so the CEC or someone else on staff has to be empowered to act and clear guidelines are needed to protect the CEC and the candidates.

Former election candidates felt there was no one they could share their concerns with and get advice. It would be useful to consider if there is someone other than the CEC could exist to support candidates.

The UWSA did not do a particularly good job of documenting the concerns and issues related to the election process. confidentiality needs to be protected, it is also important to file complaints and have the names and contact information of those who submit statements.

The role of the University to support UWSA around a human rights complaint needs to be clarified. It was a significant setback when the HRDO's office, based on their policies, could not proceed with investigating the complaint.

Recommendations:

9. Clarify if a social media post (or a set of posts) is sufficient to move into a complaint process. Much of the actions that led to these situations was based on social media. If a social media post is sufficient, develop a fair and transparent process for people to engage in to support resolution.
10. Clarify the process for complaints at UWSA. Differentiate between workplace complaints which would apply to the Executive members; and complaints against Executive and Board members in the political and governance context.
11. Develop restorative justice processes for UWSA to resolve conflict.
12. Approve and adhere to a Code of Conduct for the Board and Executive.

ADDRESSING ISSUES OF COMPLAINTS WITHIN THE WORKPLACE BETWEEN STAFF AND EXECUTIVES

The Executive members of the board are both student leaders and employees of UWSA. There needs to be consistent risk policies that both staff and Executive are required to comply with to protect the UWSA.

The complaint process needs to be much clearer. Former Executives, students, or board members did not submit a formal complaint through a transparent process. As the Human Rights and Diversity Office noted, there was no clear complainant and they do not do third party complaints. It is important that the UWSA establish who the formal complainant was and whether they will allow for third party complaints.

The staff clearly also did not have a clear way to openly and constructively address issues with their employers. If a concern is raised about the Executive members' performance where would the Chief Operating Officer bring that concern to?

Recommendation:

13. Establish a board committee that can review the rare times when executive and senior staff are not in alignment and support them to resolve issues interfering with their working relationship.
14. Develop a risk management policy for critical decisions need to be take on issues that affect UWSA reputation, funding, by-law and policy compliance. The policy can guide if the action being proposed by the executive or the senior staff is wise or if it will adversely impact the UWSA.

ONGOING BOARD DEVELOPMENT

This situation exposed significant weaknesses in UWSA's governance structure including: one-year terms; the lack of accountability mechanisms, clear conduct guidelines for UWSA leaders; and the lack of clear processes to address complaints and concerns. The situation also showed the strength of the student leadership in the UWSA board to identify solutions to complex issues.

Recommendation:

15. Establish an ongoing leadership/board development plan for the Board that includes:
 - a. a mentoring program for all Executive and Board members;
 - b. orientation for all positions;
 - c. ongoing board training;
 - d. clarity of leadership expectations; and
 - e. responsibility to create safer spaces and address systemic racism.

STUDENT CAMPAIGNS

The previous Executive had been proactive and had led a number of initiatives including addressing issues like systemic racism in the University environment. The election of a new Executive with a platform that had different priorities from the previous Executive meant that some of the work that was important to both students and staff was potentially ending or being fundamentally changed. While recognizing that the new Executive had been elected by the students, there was also a sense that the student body is diverse and there are some campaigns and priorities that need to continue beyond one year.

Recommendation:

16. Consider separating campaign priorities and election slate priorities. There are some priorities like systemic racism and tuition that could be long term priorities. The campaigns could be endorsed by the student body every year through a referendum separate from the election of Executive and Board.

IMPLEMENTED REFORMS:

The recommendations made above were extensively discussed at the UWSA Board of Directors Meetings, and worked on by the By-Law and Policy committee. A student feedback form was also set up on the UWSA website from February 12 – 24, 2021. After careful consideration, the UWSA Board voted to pass the following by-law changes on February 24, 2021. These reforms can be found in Sections IV and V of the [UWSA By-Laws](#) and Article XIV of the [UWSA Policy Manual](#).



1. Staggered two-year terms for the UWSA Vice-President External Affairs (VPEA), Vice-President Student Affairs (VPSA), and four Emerging Leader Directors. (based on Rec. 4)

To be able to implement this, the 2021 General Elections, the VPEA and two Emerging Leader Directors will be elected for two-year terms. In 2022 General Elections, the VPSA and two Emerging Leader Directors will be elected for two-year terms.

Why: This will ensure that there is always someone new and someone experienced on the Executive team and the Board. It will help the older directors share their experiences and pass on knowledge and campaigns to the new team members. The new directors and VPs will also bring in new ideas to the team and be supported. Additionally, a one-year governance responsibility is a very short period of time for executives to be able to achieve their goals. This will help them work on achieving organizational goals and provide stability.

2. Creation of Four Emerging Leader Directors positions. (based on Rec.15)

Their duties include general membership engagement; promotion of UWSA events, board meetings, and general meetings; and assisting the VPs in board mentorship and transition year-to-year.

Why: Emerging Leader Directors are a great opportunity for students to develop leadership, collaboration, and mentorship skills. When assisting the VPs will help them get insight into what it means to be an executive and motivate them to take on future leadership roles. The directors' duties also align with UWSA values of outreach and engagement.

3. Introduction of an Election Evaluation and Feedback Policy (based on Rec. 1)

This policy will help the UWSA evaluate the reforms and monitor them for impact. Election Campaign Facilitators (ECF's) will conduct an entry assessment with election candidates to understand their needs and goals and exit assessments to learn about their experiences and examine the strengths and weaknesses of the election process. A summary of the feedback will be included in the Final Election Report and guide how this policy will be reshaped.



Why: Establishing an Election Evaluation and Feedback Policy directly aligns the election process with UWSA's value of accessibility, anti-oppressive leadership, authentic representation, outreach and engagement, organizational integrity, empathy, and continual reflection. The feedback we receive from candidates will help us understand the strengths and weaknesses of our elections and help build a democratic election process.

4. Creation of two new roles of Election Campaign Facilitators (ECFs) (Based on Rec. 3)

The ECFs act on behalf of the UWSA Membership to support electoral candidates and volunteers through the elections process, to facilitate the collaborative creation of the UWSA Election Campaign, and to mediate conflicts that arise throughout the electoral process.

Why: The creation of ECF positions will help support the CEC during elections and offer candidates additional support with conflict resolution, campaign and promotion.

5. Modifications to the Chief Election Commissioners role (Based on Rec 3)

The CEC now works with ECFs and is accountable to the Election Accountability Board (EAB). Their primary duty is to focus on election logistics like the candidate and referendum nomination process, manage offline polling and digital voting, manage ballot counting, and announce the election results.

Why: The CECs workload will now be split into three positions which will help the CEC focus on organizing a fair and transparent nominations and voting process. Since their duties do not include mediation of campaigning disputes, they will not be in conflict with candidates during the campaign period. In case of disputes, the CEC can also go to the EAB for advice.

6. The Election Accountability Board (EAB) replaces Referenda and Elections By-law Interpretation and Transparent Enforcement Board (REBLITE) Board (Based on Rec 3)

The EAB acts on behalf of the UWSA membership to support the CEC and ECFs in the management of a fair and transparent election and referenda process. Questions, concerns, and complaints arising from CEC or ECFs' interpretation of the By-Laws may be directed to the chair of the EAB. The CEC and ECFs are accountable to the EAB.

Why: The EAB will now support the CEC and ECFs in conflict resolution. EAB does not need formal complaint to meet, the ECFs and CEC can also call on them for guidance. If conflict between a candidate and the CEC/ECF escalates, the complaint will be directed to the EAB. Only the EAB can enforce consequences on candidates, taking the onus off of the CEC and ECFs. The Election Accountability Board has automatic membership of the entire board

of directors and students at large who are not running in that election cycle to ensure meetings can be scheduled with timeliness.

7. Collective campaign opportunities for candidates (Rec 1 and 9)

The ECFs will collaborate with election participants and the UWSA Communications Department to develop a joint UWSA Election Campaign that is equally accessible to all campaign participants during Campaign Preparation Week. The ECFs will organize campaign opportunities for candidates and volunteers including debates, forums, classroom presentations, meetings with student groups, and more.

Why: Participation in the development of a joint election campaign will encourage candidates to participate in the creation of campaign materials and event planning as a team. Removing budget management and marketing responsibility from candidates will make elections accessible and engage new students who might have not previously participated in elections due to inexperience or lack of connections. It will give candidates the freedom to focus on promoting the skills and ideas they want to bring in their position.

8. Removal of slates and collusion between candidates (Based on Rec 1 and 16)

The amended by-laws remove the option for candidates to register as slates to shift the focus from individual agendas to student and organizational priorities.

Why: Removal of slates will align the election process to UWSA values of organizational integrity. This will support the collaborative creation of a UWSA campaign between all candidates that focuses on students' needs over what one student or group thinks needs to be prioritized. This will allow for elected directors and executives to work on achievable, long-term goals instead of annual ones.

The previous process encouraged combativeness by forcing participants to file formal complaints against each other when conflict arose, resulting in inconsistent penalties and a strict reporting time restriction. Removing the slate system and creating a new process of appeal and accountability that center mediation and learning resonates with the value of Anti-oppressive Leadership.

9. Simplification of the nomination process (Based on Rec 1)

The amended bylaws simplify the election nomination process by modifying the nomination forms to require less information from the candidates, remove nominator signatures, and give candidates the freedom to switch the positions they are running for at the start of ACTP week.



Why: Simplifying the nomination process will encourage more students to run in UWSA Elections and align the elections to UWSA values of accessibility, outreach and engagement. The requirement to collect 20 nominators' signatures seemed daunting and discouraged many students to submit a nomination form. Candidates will also have the flexibility to switch the positions they are running for as they learn more about the available positions and their duties.

10. Creation of All Candidates' Training and Preparation (ACTP) Week (Based on Rec 2)

During the ACTP Week on Week 3 of the election cycle, ECFs will hold training and preparation sessions for all candidates that cover topics like collaborative governance, UWSA mission and vision, internal structure and operations, UWSA Ambassadorship Policies, election rules, non-profit board regulations, duties and privileges; how to campaign; and conflict mediation and resolution. The ECFs will also collaborate with election participants in the creation of the UWSA Election Campaign.

Why: The ACTP Week will allow for ECFs to support candidates in campaign development, promotion, and understanding the election process. Candidates will be able to learn about the UWSA and student body's short and long-term objectives and align their vision to that of the organisation. The goal of the ACTP week is to help candidates participate in a successful, collaborative campaign, and feel prepared to take on the roles they are running for.

NEXT STEPS

The above-mentioned reforms are the beginning of an effort to create a de-colonial and democratic UWSA. The process to restructure the UWSA and align our actions with our policies is meant to be a continually evolving one. Over the next few months, we plan to continue to improve on existing by-laws and policies and implement new ones. Some ideas to address the other institutional issues are listed below. Students are encouraged to continue to give their feedback on the [UWSA website here](#).

IDEAS TO SUPPORT EXECUTIVE TRANSITION (Rec 6, 7, 8):

- Have a mandatory visioning session for new executives.
- Have individual staff meet up with the new executives.
- Mandatory orientation session with previous executives.
- Establish a week for staff to transition from one leadership to the other.
- Hold opening and closing circle with past and present directors after each transition.
- Implement a process of regular evaluation and feedback (For directors points of contact could include after registering for a role, post-election, pre-term, and post-term)

- Consider multiple forms of evaluation, and identify processes that are supportive and have clear objectives.

IDEAS TO ADDRESS THE ISSUE OF COMPLAINTS WITHIN THE GOVERNANCE AND ELECTION PROCESS (Rec 10. 11, 12):

- Create a complaints/investigations process that is clearly outlined.
- Lean on the Positive Space Policy.
- Have a campaign school and campaign code of conduct assessment tool
- Edit code of conduct policy to include the four teachings as behavioural expectations and include a statement of intention signed by directors
- Code of conduct must be enforceable, and human rights complaints made clearer and more accessible.

THIS REPORT WAS PREPARED WITH THE SUPPORT OF:

[Catalyst Research and Communications](#)

UWSA Board of Directors

Former and current UWSA Executives of 2019-20 and 2020-21

UWSA Staff

Feedback received from the UWSA Membership