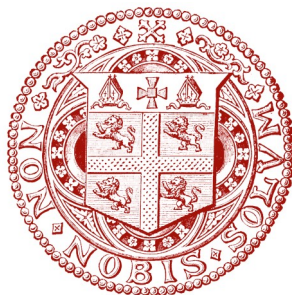


University College Middle Common Room

Non nobis solum



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The History of the MCR Constitution (Standing Orders)

The Beginning

The MCR Standing Orders started as the Constitution of the Middle Common Room of University College when first formally assembled. It was formally recognised by the Governing Body of University College on Wednesday the 13th of October 1999, and was ratified by the first properly constituted Middle Common Room of University College on Tuesday the 2nd of November 1999. This was the latest step in a long history of graduate and postgraduate life in College, which was felt at the time of writing to be in need of formation and direction, particularly in light of the Warden's desire to see academic life in the Colleges promoted.

Graduate and postgraduate involvement in College goes back to the Thorp Club, an informal gathering of postgraduates largely for social purposes. However, with each passing year a merely social grouping seemed increasingly inadequate. Discussions with numerous postgraduates across the University revealed a general malaise in their treatment: they felt uninformed and excluded from the altogether different experience of Durham's undergraduates. The most logical place to target such a malaise lies in the strength of the College, wherein the movers behind this Common Room feel is by far the most conducive atmosphere for welcome and inclusion. Simply being included as members of Junior Common Rooms was a start, but it did not go far enough. JCR Executive Committees are overworked every year in preparing for the arrival of first year undergraduates (whose needs are very different from older arrivals), and so an MCR Executive Committee was needed to ensure that proper preparation was made for the arrival of new graduates and postgraduates. On arriving in College, they would be members of a Common Room peculiar to their concerns. It was felt to be important that their concerns were located in the context of another common room since many of its members are mature or at least older students whose views can be somewhat different from the younger members of the JCR, and also its members predominantly lived outside College and required a more sharply focused point of contact within it.

It was with these and other concerns in mind that a group of postgraduates began, in 1998, to assemble a Middle Common Room. Attempts were hampered by dissertation deadlines and logistical problems, and foundered on the compromise of creating a 'middle common room-society' within the JCR, and plans were eventually dropped. A constant problem has always

been perceived in continuity, since so many of the members of the Middle Common Room remain within it for only one year, and so potential solutions to the problem had to be found. The Constitution attempted to minimise the problems in several ways. Firstly, an Executive Officer of the Common Room (the Convenor) was appointed in order to see that Officers are in place each year. Secondly, it allows for all those who enter the Common Room in the following academic year both to stand for election and to vote; new as well as existing members. And finally, the Common Room's membership was widened by the presence of older members of the Junior Common as Associate Members.

College Officers and others have been immensely encouraging, and with this in mind it is hoped that this renewed project will mark the beginning of greater postgraduate strength and involvement in University College, and that they will be better able to make their distinctive contribution to College felt.

The 2009 Amendment

Since its formal creation in 1999, the Middle Common Room of University College continued to develop and expand. Numbers of postgraduates applying to be members of College had steadily risen, and the establishment of University College postgraduate accommodation for the first time in 2008 cemented this growth, building on the initial aims of those founder members of the MCR who wished to create an atmosphere conducive to welcome and inclusion.

The constitutional amendments of 2009 contained changes necessitated by decisions reached in the constitutionally required form as well as the need to modify certain anachronisms that had developed over the first ten years of the MCR's existence. They were presented to and ratified by the MCR on Wednesday 13th January 2010.

The increase in membership led to several important changes. Firstly, it was agreed by the MCR that associate membership would no longer be offered to fourth year undergraduates, as their interests and aims were best served by being solely members of the JCR, and that the MCR should exist primarily for the benefit of postgraduate members of College. Additionally it was also agreed that the limited distinction between honorary and associate membership would be abolished, with only ordinary and associate membership remaining.

At the suggestion of James Gate (President 2008-09), the membership of the Executive Committee was expanded to help not only run the larger MCR as a body within College, but also to engage with the MCRs of other colleges and other external institutions, ensuring that postgraduate members of College could benefit fully from the opportunities offered during their time at the University of Durham. It was also suggested that the enlarged Executive Committee was to be elected in accordance with a new timetable. It was decided that the positions of President and Treasurer (regarded as the 'core' executive positions) were to be elected at the end of Easter Term to ensure continuity and oversee preparations for the arrival of new MCR members at the beginning of Michaelmas term, whilst the remaining positions (Secretary, Steward, Welfare Representative and Durham Students' Union representative) would be elected at the beginning of Michaelmas term. It was the opinion of the MCR that this system allowed new members to stand and vote for a range of positions, thereby allowing for and encouraging the involvement of new members, whilst at the same time ensuring the long term stability of the MCR through the election of the positions of President and Treasurer by

an electorate with experience of the MCR. In addition, a Freshers Committee was also established to assist the newly elected President and Treasurer to run the MCR prior to the election of the rest of the Executive Committee.

The 2013 Amendment

In Epiphany 2013, the MCR Constitution was again amended, by unanimous vote of an Ordinary Meeting of the MCR, to reflect changes in the wider representative structures of the University, and to assist in the running of the Common Room, which had grown to over 200 members by Michaelmas 2012.

Firstly, the position of DSU Representative was abolished, reflecting changes in the DSU Council and the creation of separately elected DSU Representatives per college, rather than per common room. Secondly, it was felt that the growing size of the Common Room, and the increasing time commitment required from the President to ensure its smooth operation, necessitated the establishment of a Vice-Presidency. The Vice-President would be responsible for representing the MCR externally, and for assisting the President in the day-to-day running of the MCR. The creation of this role also gave the MCR an officer who could act in lieu of the President if he or she is absent, particularly when dealing with College and University authorities.

Finally, amendments were made to introduce electronic voting by secret ballot, replacing postal votes by email. This measure does not replace the traditional method of election used in the MCR, but instead allows absent members to vote in a more secure and democratic manner.

The 2014 Amendments

In Epiphany 2014, the Constitution was updated to represent the greatly increased activity of the MCR and to correct numerous errata and remaining anachronisms. It now included a Social Committee and Ball Committee headed by the Social Chair, and an Academic Events Committee headed by the Vice-President.

It was again redrafted, and renamed 'standing orders' in line with the 'Durham Student Organisation' framework, during the Long Vacation of 2014 in order to reflect the much expanded size of the MCR, new electoral arrangements and to accommodate general harmonisation of the document. It was presented to the MCR for ratification on Wednesday 22nd October 2014.

The 2015 Amendments

At the Michaelmas Ordinary Meeting of the MCR significant changes to the standing orders were presented for a vote. The vote rendered a two-thirds majority for approval of all changes; however, quorum of 20% of the MCR was not reached. Many of the proposed changes were necessary for the MCR to continue to operate so the issue was brought to College Office. Because College Office and College Council have ultimate authority to change the standing orders the proposed changes were sent to them for approval. At the

Michaelmas 2015 College Council meeting the significant changes to the standing orders were approved. These changes included but were not limited to:

- Removal of redundant or conflicting information.
- Removal of Associate Membership.
- Removal of the positions of Vice-President and Secretary.
- Substantial changes to the duties of the executive positions.
- Inclusion of a permanent CCA Rep.
- Changing the Returning Officer to Internal Affairs Officer and expanding the role.
- Reducing quorum for ratification to 10% of the MCR.

The 2024 Standing Order Reform

In the summer of 2024, the Common Room underwent the most extensive and transformative reform, led by President George Vranceanu and supported by 31 petitioners who championed the cause of equality and transparency. This reform represents a pivotal moment in the MCR's governance, receiving one of the highest levels of electoral support.

The necessity for change became apparent during the Michaelmas Term when, due to an unforeseen anomaly, all Executive Committee positions were filled through a by-election. For the first time, Master's students were given the opportunity to run for senior leadership positions, which had previously been dominated by PhD students due to the summer election timetable. This imbalance highlighted a deeper structural issue: the standing orders no longer reflected the diverse needs of the MCR's membership. Over the years, the standing orders had been amended with a very low quorum, without the need for significant involvement from the broader membership. As a result, a small group of individuals could exert undue influence over the direction of the MCR, leaving the membership without a true voice in shaping the community.

It became clear that the MCR's governing documents were outdated, unclear, and riddled with contradictions, hindering the development of a more inclusive and equitable environment for all members. Thus, over 50% of the Standing Orders were modified, including but not limited to:

1. **Restructuring of the Membership System:** A clearly defined membership structure, including eligibility for undergraduate students enrolled in integrated Master's programs, those who have completed a year abroad, or mature students, ensuring inclusivity and clarity.
2. **Restructuring of the Election System:** A unified election timetable has been implemented to ensure equal opportunities for both Master's and PhD students. All elections will now take place at the beginning of the academic year, addressing the previous imbalance where PhD students had a disproportionate advantage in leadership elections.

3. **Restructuring of Executive Committee Responsibilities:** A comprehensive redefinition of the roles and responsibilities within the Executive Committee, ensuring clearer distinctions and alignment with the needs of the membership.
4. **Restructuring of the Feedback and Complaints Procedure:** A revised feedback form and complaints process, aimed at promoting constructive discourse and preventing misuse of anonymous submissions.
5. **Creation of a Structured Awards System:** Establishment of a formal structure for the Colours Award, alongside the introduction of *Lifetime Membership* as a prestigious honour for individuals who have significantly contributed to the community beyond the expectations of their roles. The number of Colours has also been drastically limited.
6. **Introduction of a Transparency Section:** The implementation of a transparency section to enhance openness and accountability, providing members with accessible information about the operations of the MCR.
7. **Restructuring the Vote of No Confidence Procedure:** A systematic approach to the procedure for initiating a Vote of No Confidence against an Executive Committee member, making the process more rigorous and structured.
8. **Incorporation of Equality as a Core Value:** The inclusion of equality as a fundamental principle within the MCR, reinforcing the commitment to fair and inclusive governance.
9. **Redrafting of the Standing Orders:** A complete redrafting of the standing orders to ensure uniformity, remove contradictions, and clarify provisions, while retaining flexibility where necessary.
10. **Introduction of Executive Benefits Linked to Performance:** The introduction of performance-based benefits for Executive Committee members, particularly tied to the successful organisation of events and high levels of engagement from the membership.
11. **Increasing the quorum in the Standing Order Changes to 20% of the Membership.**
12. **The creation of a structure for an MCR Tech Department.**

This reform ensures that everyone is important and that all members—whether new or experienced—bring something valuable to the table. It is the Members who now have the voice and the authority to shape the future of the MCR, not just the experienced minority. The reforms have created a more inclusive and democratic environment where every contribution counts and everyone is encouraged to get involved in running the MCR irrespective of their experience; we are a learning community.

Acknowledgements

- The MCR Constitution began to be drafted in the Epiphany Term of 1999 by David Sudron, with advice from John Munns, reaching its complete form in the Long Vacation of 1999. It is indebted to the contribution of Dr Martin Leyland, whose experience of such affairs in College is invaluable.
- It was redrafted in the Long Vacation of 2009 by James Gate, Richard Harness, and Christian Schneider.

- Significant amendments were made during Epiphany Term 2014 by Chris Bosson, and the Constitution was redrafted as 'standing orders' in line with the 'Durham Student Organisation' framework during the Long Vacation of 2014 by Joshua Jowitt.
- Substantial changes and redrafting of the standing orders were made during the Long Vacation of 2015 by Steven Beckett.
- The Standings Orders of the MCR have undergone its largest reform in 2024, drafted by George E. Vranceanu (*President*), Rohit Dharmapuri (*International Officer*), Chloe A. Donnelly (*Vice-President*), Kari L. Walker (*Welfare Officer*), Sasis Im- aroonrak (*Steward*) alongside the dedication, support and help of the 31 petitioners who stood up for the principles of equality. Their call for change was instrumental in addressing the long-standing issues of governance and ensuring that all voices within the MCR are heard. Their efforts will be remembered as a cornerstone of this historic transformation.