



Student Society Summit Participants

27 King's College Circle
Toronto, Ontario
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RE: PARTICIPATION IN THE STUDENT SOCIETY SUMMIT

Dear friends, colleagues, administrative faculty and administrative observers,

I am writing to you to inform you that the University of Toronto Mississauga Students' Union (UTMSU) can no longer participate in the Student Society Summit (the Summit). We have received hundreds of petitions from our membership demanding that we – and the University of Toronto Students' Union (UTSU) – cease participating in this body. The concerns that we have received from our members are:

- The Summit is undemocratic and does not allow for participation or engagement by our members.
- The Summit privileges some student groups over others, who have been disparaged and disrespected through this process.
- The Summit has been discussing scenarios that treat University of Toronto Mississauga (UTM) students as second-class students of the University of Toronto, and bars us from participating in valuable student leadership opportunities.

As a students' union, we are further concerned that:

- The Summit represents a breach of students' union autonomy.
- The Summit has engaged in discussions about other students' unions who have been barred from participating.
- There have never been any specific terms of reference or information about the scope of this body provided to us. All information relating to its purpose has been vague.
- The Summit has encouraged the UTMSU and the UTSU to open ourselves up to litigation by violating contract law.
- The Summit seeks negotiation and compromise on an unequal playing field.
- The Summit fails to recognize and discuss incidents of bullying and intimidation tactics as part of the problem.

We believe further participation and implicit consent of the Summit will have a negative impact on our membership, and the student body as a whole. As a result, we also encourage other student groups to cease participation in the summit. I will address each of these concerns below.

UNDEMOCRATIC STRUCTURE LACKING BASIC TRANSPARENT PRINCIPLES & LACK OF CONSIDERATION OF SUBMISSIONS

The Student Society Summit operates within an undemocratic structure, lacking basic transparent principles. We receive agendas with very little time to consult or prepare with

our membership. We did not have an opportunity to select our chair. We had no opportunity to shape its structure and mandate. There is no way for our clubs, academic societies or for individual students to engage and participate or voice their concerns. We acknowledge that when these concerns were raised, the Summit allowed for the submission of documents. However, this provision was seemingly only to placate concerns. There has been no space allotted for the review and consideration of these submissions. As this Summit may make recommendations that could potentially influence policy that may have the ability to seriously affect our membership (it is tough to know, there have never been terms of reference provided to us), it is especially concerning that our membership cannot participate or have any information provided to them.

PRIVILEGING STUDENT GROUPS

The Student Society Summit refuses to acknowledge the important role that clubs, levy groups and other students' unions play as integral stakeholders of the University of Toronto Students' Union. In fact, the only stakeholders that the Student Society Summit recognizes are those that have *zero* stakeholderhood when it comes to the UTSU. Given that the Summit is really a forum to discuss the UTSU's internal processes, rather than a true forum for society discussion, this is extremely inappropriate. The Muslim Students' Association, which spans both campuses, has more members, has a larger budget than many of the student groups represented here and whose budget *comes directly from the UTSU* is not permitted to participate. The combined Centres for Women and Trans People have more student participation and a larger budget, *which also comes directly from the UTSU*, than many of the student groups represented here.

The reasons we were given for this exclusion was that the groups around the table get their money directly from the University and share the UTSU's membership. This is poor reasoning. Why does that make these groups the best positioned to examine UTSU's internal processes? Additionally, the Association for Part-time Undergraduate Students (APUS) fit these parameters, however, they were not permitted to participate. It seems to me that the structure of this group has excluded the legitimate stakeholders of a central students' union. We find this dishonest, unfair and extremely undemocratic.

TREATING UTM STUDENTS AS SECOND-CLASS STUDENTS

Some of the comments made by our peers in describing students at the Mississauga campus have been very troubling. We have been referred to as though we are not made up of individual, responsible, intelligent adults and as though we are not to have the same rights conferred to us as members of the UTSU as other students. We would never accuse any of our peers in the same way and are saddened that we are seen this way. We do not understand the animosity, but refuse to be treated this way any further. We do not need a patronizing body to discuss what our relationship to the University of Toronto or to the UTSU should be. Mississauga students are perfectly capable of engaging with the UTSU as individual, free-thinking adults, and we will continue to do so. We do not need the administration, administrative faculty or other autonomous student bodies to tell us how to engage with the UTSU. In fact, our membership does not even need us to tell them how to

engage in the UTSU, or to negotiate that process. They are perfectly capable of doing so on their own.

We have to question why this perception exists. On the face of it, the only things that are apparently different about our society and the others that exist at the Student Society Summit are that we are located farther away from the UTSU than most other societies and that we have a much higher proportion of racialized students on our campus and so tend to be represented by racialized members. We cannot help but notice that there have been discussions at the summit about why some societies represent cultural groups, why we shouldn't represent cultural groups like the Chinese Undergraduate Students, that groups like the Sexual Education Centre and the Centre for Women and Trans People are "controversial", and that these questions have been brought up by non-racialized students or administration. There are very few members of any of these groups in the room who can speak to their importance. In fact, there is almost zero participation from women students, mature students, racialized students, students with disabilities, international students and trans students. One of the few racialized and international students in the room has had her ability to *understand* the conversation questioned because she asked for further information. For all the talk about "natural constituencies", these are the true identities of students that must be discussed and recognized. As one of the few racialized students in the room, I can tell you that it has been extremely difficult to participate, especially when there are a number of white non-racialized men aggressively telling me that my ideas and contributions are worth little and that their ideas and contributions are worth more.

BREACH OF STUDENTS' UNION AUTONOMY

As a students' union, we exist as a separate organization from the university. Our autonomy is a good thing. We love the University of Toronto, and only want to see the University be the best version of what it is. We acknowledge that the administration and faculty want the same. Sometimes, our methods for creating the best version of the University are congruent, and so we work together. Sometimes they differ. It is important for us to exist separately so we can effectively challenge when our opinions differ without fear of material reprisal. This relationship has only served the University well, as students have been able to open up Robarts Library for undergraduate students, ensure women have access to Hart House, ensure sweat shop-free policies for the administration and save our members from paying for courses that they do not take. As students, we think that these were all steps toward establishing a better U of T that the administration disagreed with at the time.

We cannot act in the best interest of students as directed by students if we fear that the administration, administrative staff, administrative faculty, faculty or any other group is influencing us in such a way that we will not be able to carry out the will of our membership, effectively represent their interests and ensure their rights are being respected. In a world where students now contribute to over 50 per cent of the University's operating budget with very little decision-making control or evaluative tools for quality, this autonomy is one of our very few important rights and we must protect it. The University role is not a paternal one; we are adults and should be respected as such. We therefore reject participation in a process that encourages a relationship that directly attacks student union autonomy.

DISCUSSION OF AUTONOMOUS STUDENTS' UNIONS BARRED FROM PARTICIPATION

The Summit has engaged in conversations contemplating scenarios where UTMSU, SCSU and APUS do not exist. Though we are unsure of the scope of the recommendations that the administrative faculty will be making, we think it is reasonable to assume that if such a scenario is being contemplated, the Summit administrative faculty may make recommendations that include the realization of these scenarios.

We cannot in good conscience participate in a body that could have significant ramifications on our organization and on other student groups when they are not present. We would never condone policies that will be forced onto other autonomous organizations without the support of their membership. We would not do this to any other student organization, and we hope that no other student organization would do such a thing to us. As we are now exiting this process, we expect your discussions about us to end.

LACK OF TERMS OF REFERENCE, SCOPE OR PURPOSE IDENTIFIED

The University of Toronto Mississauga Students' Union does not know what the purpose of the Summit is. We do not know what the scope is, and we do not know if there are any rules for engagement. This makes it difficult for us to participate. If we do not even know what the potential outcomes could be, how can we adequately describe to our members what it is that we are even participating in? If the purpose is to resolve issues that exist between some student societies, why are we here? Why does it not focus on those few societies? If it is to discuss student organizations as a whole, why is it missing some student groups? Why do we need this? Who asked for it? Why were we not consulted on its structure and membership?

The UTMSU has a purpose and a mission that guides everything that we do. This purpose and mission was democratically voted upon by our membership. We are unsure that this Summit is congruent with our mission and purpose. We have spent many hours in these meetings, in preparation of these meetings and reporting back to our membership about these meetings. We have serious concerns that the unknown purpose of this Summit is in conflict with our mission, and as such an inappropriate use of our valuable time.

SEEKING NEGOTIATION AND COMPROMISE ON AN UNEQUAL PLAYING FIELD

The idea that the Summit seeks to negotiate compromise between organizations with entirely different mandates is strange. Even more strange is that some groups believe they have everything to gain (through gaining additional revenue) and nothing to lose in the process. Some groups have everything to lose (fees, services, ability to advocate for their membership), and nothing to gain from this process. How can a true negotiation and compromise happen in these circumstances? What gives these unrelated organizations the ability to demand fees from other groups and be seen as reasonable by the administration, administrative faculty and their peers?

Some of the outcomes of this reality seem to be complete dishonesty in an attempt to gain favour with the administrative faculty. For example, a topic of discussion has been the fact that the University of Toronto Students' Union allows proxies at their meetings and Annual General Meetings (as do we). So does the Engineering Society. The UTSU has a policy and procedure committee through which Bylaws must be examined before being sent to General Meetings (as do we). So does the Engineering Society. But you would not know such a thing based on our discussions. The playing field is unequal, and with nothing to lose, what difference does it make to the group who only stands to gain if they are not entirely transparent in their arguments?

This strange format has opened up questions that are impossible to discuss with the same frame of understanding. For example, there have been questions about whether or not students' union Executive Committee positions should be full-time. This has not been a question among students so far as we can tell. It certainly has not come up in the appropriate democratic discussion forum. But with a different mandate and purpose, it doesn't make sense to compare the idea that one student society can manage with volunteer, part-time positions, while another cannot. The purpose of one group is to monitor the many University committees in addition to federal and provincial government positions with respect to education quality, funding, loans and fees, as well as to provide services, events and create a more equitable community. The purposes of many of the other groups are to foster leadership opportunities, create a community space and provide services. Each of these purposes are necessary and important. This is why so many students are engaged in all of our groups. But the experiences in each are different because of their different mandates. Without this understanding, how could these realities be adequately compared?

To reiterate: the student societies on campus have different mandates and purposes. We are not related, though we interact. This strange idea that unrelated bodies can materially affect each other's fees and structure in this manner has led to issues on our campus of students wanting to divert fees from the Varsity to the UTMSU and from Hart House to the UTMSU on our campus. We are not prepared to deal with these issues, nor do we want to. We respect the value that each of these student organizations and student services on campus. To increase the impact and value they have to each of our individual members, we encourage our members to engage in their democratic processes, or engage in them ourselves, where appropriate.

ENCOURAGING STUDENTS' SOCIETIES TO OPEN THEMSELVES UP TO LITIGATION

During the discussions, we have been encouraged to breach contract law by divulging the content of a contract that exists between the UTSU and ourselves. Despite our offers to summarize the content relevant to the discussion and our protestation that divulging the contract was against the provisions of the contract, we were *still* encouraged, by both administrative faculty and other student groups (presumably unfamiliar with corporation responsibilities, Director and Officer liability, and contract law) to provide the Summit with the contract. As was stated, we cannot do so, as it would be in violation of the confidentiality of the contract. Divulging the contract would be in violation of both contract law and the Employment Standards Act. The University administration is presumably aware of this, as

we have been denied access to contracts from the University itself. To be clear, **we have no issues summarizing its contents**. Though we have stated this many times, we have been met with suspicion and called unprofessional. Many participants of the Summit have made claims that have not been subject to such scrutiny. Each of the other participants has been trusted on their word. We are offended and disturbed by the unfair treatment we have been receiving, as one of the only groups in the room who routinely challenge the administration on their actions in order to protect student rights.

THE SUMMIT FAILS TO RECOGNIZE BULLYING AND INTIMIDATION TACTICS AS PART OF THE PROBLEM

The UTMSU is always subject to bullying behaviour during Orientation when we participate in events on the St. George campus. This has at times reached the point where we have seriously considered no longer participating in events where some students' societies will be present. We have seen disparaging comments online about UTSU's insistence on providing American Sign Language interpretation and encouraging indigenous elder participation at their events. We have heard about dead animal carcasses being delivered to the UTSU office for years. There is obvious bullying that occurs of candidates for elections in certain constituencies if they are not in some way connected to their constituent student society. There is even the targeting of our apparent ability to engage students from diverse backgrounds and the participation of hijabi Muslim women in the students' unions at both the UTMSU and the UTSU! These issues seem to be part of a campaign to malign the UTSU or at the very least, make it difficult for other students to become involved in their students' unions. We have had our members tell us that they would like to be involved with the UTSU, but fear the treatment they will receive from other student society leadership. But the Summit assumes that the only issues worthy of discussion lie with the UTSU. As a target of some of this harassment that occurs both in the form of online bullying and in-person harassment, I find it frustrating that these issues cannot be given space for discussion in this Summit. Of those who are often targeted, there are very few participating in the Summit, and those who are managing the process are not attempting to support us and provide us with space to bring up our concerns. I cannot participate when this reality is not recognized and structurally addressed.

CONCLUSION

We have not come to the decision to exit the Summit lightly. As you can see, we have considered the potential harms of our continued participation in depth. As far as we are concerned, the UTSU is not a federation, the UTMSU not a federated body within the UTSU, nor do we wish to be. We want nothing more to do with these discussions.

We ask all of you to consider whether or not you should be participating in these discussions. The University is not our parent. We are autonomous student organizations run by adults. We should be able to resolve our differences on our own and treat each other with dignity and respect while doing so. We can disagree with each other, and come together when we wish to. But quite frankly, the level of discourse on this campus in the past couple years has been embarrassing.



As I stated in my introduction, our membership have collected petitions demanding that both the UTMSU and the UTSU no longer participate. The petitions also encourage the UTSU to design its own Summit, with democratic participation from all stakeholders, to ensure that all students' diverse opinions and voices are heard. We encourage this framework, as we recognize that there are issues to discuss and that not all of the students who should be part of the discussions are represented around the Summit table. We also encourage the UTSU to consult its wider membership about its continued participation in this Summit.

Thankfully, the UTSU has not let these issues stop them from working on the issues that matter to all of our shared membership. This year is full of countless examples of the benefit of a central students' union. From saving each of our shared members \$26 per year on Copyright fees, to saving some students upwards of \$2300 per year on flat tuition fees, to discussing the rights of unpaid interns with the government, to educating student governors on tuition fee policy; this is the work of the University of Toronto Students' Union. You should all seriously ask yourselves if your continued participation in this Summit and other actions some of you may have taken throughout the past year are truly in an effort to benefit your members.

With respect, and hope for a future where we can work together.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'Melissa Theodore'. The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Melissa Theodore
Vice-President External, University of Toronto Mississauga Students' Union
On behalf of the UTMSU Executive Committee

Cc:

All UTM recognized clubs & societies.
African Students' Association
Black Students' Association
Centres for Women and Trans People
Chinese Undergraduate Association
Erindale College African Students' Association
Honourable Brad Duguid, Minister, Training, Colleges and Universities
Joan E. Foley, Ombudsperson, University of Toronto
Muslim Students' Associations
Munib Sajjad, President, University of Toronto Students' Union
National Society of Black Engineers
Positive Minds at the University of Toronto
Prof. Cheryl Regehr, Provost and Vice President, University of Toronto
Prof. Meric Gertler, President, University of Toronto
Prof. Scott Prudham, President, University of Toronto Faculty Association
Sexual Education Centres
Sarah Worku, President, Scarborough Campus Students' Union
Susan Froom, President, Association of Part-time Undergraduate Students