

# A Survival Guide for the Executive Committee Of the University of Melbourne's CSSE Postgraduate Group

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## Abstract

This short survival guide was written by one CSSEPG executive committee member to help future prospective and elected executive committees ensure their time running the CSSEPG is effective and enjoyable. Prospective CSSEPG officers may like the idea of running a Computer Science student organisation (as they should!) but could be turned-off by false impressions of bureaucracy and large work-loads; and after the 'excitement' of the CSSEPG Annual General Meeting is over, newly elected committee members can be left wondering "what's next?" – it is exactly these questions that are answered by this guide. Future executive committee's are invited to contribute to this guide whenever they feel like they have faced a problem whose solution would be 'obvious' the second time around. In time then, this guide should help the students running the CSSEPG focus on the important things – running social and academic activities for the Department's postgraduates – rather than getting caught up with blindly finding their feet in the first few weeks. On finishing with this guide, readers should proceed to browsing through the references which are all available online; after this readers will be fully equipped to run the CSSEPG!!

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## 1 What is the CSSEPG?

The Computer Science & Software Engineering (CSSE) Postgraduate Group (CSSEPG) is the student-run association for postgraduates enrolled in the University of Melbourne's Department of Computer Science & Software Engineering. According to the Group's constitution [2], the CSSEPG's official aims are:

1. To enhance the academic and professional life of Computer Science and Software Engineering Postgraduate Students.
2. To provide academic support to fellow postgraduates and thus foster communication of research ideas and collaborations.
3. To encourage social interaction of students within the Department.
4. The assets and income of the group shall be applied solely in furtherance of its above-mentioned aims and no portion shall be distributed directly or indirectly to the members of the group except as bona fide compensation for services rendered or expenses incurred on behalf of the group.

These statements will give you an idea of what the CSSEPG is about, but are necessarily vague. In reality, the CSSEPG provides a number of *concrete services* to its member postgraduates, including:

- Leading social and academic activities that benefit groups of CSSE postgraduates of modest size (as opposed to single individuals) – past examples include pizza lunches, weekly afternoon teas, christmas parties, research-oriented seminar series;
- Directly improving infrastructure for postgraduates – one past example is a microwave for our coursework postgraduates purchased together with the honours and 4th year Software Engineering students;
- Acting as a source of (limited) funding for activities run by and for postgraduates (but that may not be run directly by committee members of the CSSEPG) – past examples include sponsoring teams to enter intra-university sports competitions, and helping students organise funding for an entire meal for a conference run by the Department; and
- Limited representation of postgraduates in Departmental, Faculty and University matters – past examples include collaboration with neighbouring societies (in Information Systems and Law) to improve the general student services at University Square and arguing for student rights in Department opening hours & rights for positions as casual tutors.

### 1.1 Who are the CSSEPG's Members Exactly?

Technically all postgraduates enrolled in the Department (independent of home Faculty), including:

- Research postgraduates:
  - PhD students
  - Masters by research students, including:
    - \* MAppSc students
    - \* MCS students
    - \* MEngSc students
    - \* MSc students
- Coursework postgraduates:
  - Masters by coursework students, including:
    - \* MCS students
    - \* MIT students
    - \* MSSE students
  - Postgraduate Diploma students

This does not usually include honours students, undergraduates or other non-students. However there are avenues for individuals not in the above identified postgraduate categories to become members of UMPA [1] and the CSSEPG [2].

Finally, CSSEPG services do not have to be restricted to CSSEPG members only. Indeed activities should include other members of the University community whenever their participation will benefit CSSEPG members (e.g. the inclusion of Departmental academics in social/academic activities, the inclusion of like-minded postgraduates from other University Departments or other Universities altogether!).

## 2 What Organisations and People do the CSSEPG Interface with?

In short we interface with anyone and everyone who will help us meet our objectives as outlined above. Some of these groups and individuals are discussed below.

### 2.1 University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association

The University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association (UMPA) is the arm of the Student Union that covers University of Melbourne postgraduates. Some readers may be aware of allegations of corruption among Melbourne University Student Union (MUSU) office bearers (some of which have been validated in court!) – this should be of no alarm to us when dealing with UMPA. UMPA is run by a separate (and seemingly more sensible and well-rounded) group of people. In particular, no allegations of corruption have been levelled at UMPA, to the author's knowledge.

The CSSEPG is currently an affiliated group under UMPA's Postgraduate Group's Scheme [3]. This has a number of very important consequences for the CSSEPG:

- The CSSEPG gains significant credibility in the eyes of its member students, the Department and the University (including UMPA itself);
- CSSEPG members gain better information (through the CSSEPG) of UMPA services; and
- The CSSEPG gains an important source of funding for postgraduate activities in the Department.

A small cost incurred from taking on these benefits of UMPA affiliation, is the marginal amount of paperwork required by UMPA. Once a year the CSSEPG must reaffiliate with UMPA (this consists of a vote at the CSSEPG Annual General Meeting to reaffiliate, and follow-up paperwork being sent to UMPA – see [3] for the latest details).

The second UMPA-related task that must be completed by the CSSEPG executive is the application to Round 1, 2 & 3 funding by UMPA. As you would expect, this means applying to funding from UMPA three times a year!! See Section 3 for details.

### 2.2 Department Staff

The CSSEPG interacts with several staff members within the Department, including:

#### 2.2.1 The Head of Department

The major part of the relationship between the CSSEPG and the HoD is in dealing with Departmental funding issues – some CSSEPG funding can come directly from the Department (rather than UMPA) but the HoD must be consulted and agree on funding the proposed activity (see Section 3 for more).

The HoD signs-off on many policy decisions that can affect CSSEPG member students, thus it may be tempting to run to him/her as soon as something 'Departmental' goes wrong. However this temptation should be resisted as the HoD is usually the 'last chance' in Departmental matters. Instead the respective postgraduate coordinators should be contacted first.

#### 2.2.2 Postgraduate Coordinators

Each degree program administered by the Department, including the PhD, research masters degrees, coursework masters degrees and postgraduate diploma, has a corresponding academic staff member assigned as the degree program's coordinator. The CSSEPG executive should

feel comfortable in contacting postgraduate coordinators with serious concerns about their students' rights, welfare, infrastructure, etc. Similarly if an opportunity arises for a coordinator's students, the executive should consider mentioning it to the coordinator and working together in implementing relevant activities.

For example, the postgraduate coordinators should be invited to the Annual General Meeting, and to social events such as afternoon teas. This gives the coordinators a chance to get to know their students better and to gather any constructive feedback their students may have.

### 2.2.3 Office Staff

The office staff are important members of the Department, and for the CSSEPG executive in particular. They can help with booking rooms, lending keys to rooms, processing Departmental funding, advising on bureaucratic issues (such as booking with the local council for use of the University Square park), etc. Be friendly and courteous to the office staff and they will do the same to you. Remember to be patient, as the office staff are regularly asked to do things in the last minute and so have busy and somewhat unpredictable schedules.

### 2.2.4 The Building Supervisor

The CSSEPG executive may need to contact the building supervisor when organising certain activities. For example to use the building's BBQ.

## 2.3 Student Reps, Seminar Coordinators

Various other students hold important roles in the Department. When 'jurisdiction' falls across such students and the CSSEPG, actions should be taken after consultation with the students involved. For example the CSSEPG can/should help in replacing postgraduate seminar coordinators (when current coordinators graduate). There are student representatives on certain Departmental committees, who should be consulted with certain representation issues – see Section 7 on the issue of representation.

## 2.4 Sister Societies

The CSSEPG has shared interests with a number of other Department-level student societies.

In particular the Melbourne University Computer Students' Association (MU-CSA) is the organisation run by and for undergraduate (and honours) students in the Department. Often issues of representation or ideas for activities relate to both undergraduates and postgraduates within the Department. In such cases the MU-CSA and CSSEPG should work together to ensure arrangements are mutually beneficial and that everyone is on the same page.

Other societies of interest are the Faculty of Law societies for geographical reasons, the Department of Electrical & Electronic Engineering societies and Department of Mathematics & Statistics societies for academic reasons and the Department of Information Systems societies for both types of reasons.

# 3 CSSEPG Funding Matters

The CSSEPG has two primary sources of funding. Although the Group's charter states explicitly that it must not be run for-profit, it is perfectly acceptable to solicit further funding from other organisations (including companies) and students (on a per-event basis) if the needs warrant it.

Although the amount of funding reasonably requested from UMPA and the Department in a year total to less than \$2,000, one should remember that most activities do not require funding. This amount of money *can* go a long way. And if this isn't enough there are always the above suggestions.

## 3.1 UMPA Funding

In the spirit of maintaining good single-point-of-control, the UMPA Postgraduate Group's Scheme funding arrangement will not be detailed here. For complete information consult, for example, [3]. We will briefly discuss the issues of importance.

The amount of funding available to a Postgraduate Group depends directly on the number of Group members – this number is established each year by the Group upon reaffiliation with UMPA whereby a list of current members (in our case postgraduate students in the Department) is collated by the Group. The funding scheme roughly operates as follows:

- The total amount of funding available to the Group over one year depends only on the number of members of the Group. At the time of writing this was \$1050 per year for our 147 students.
- The year is covered by 3 funding rounds – Round 1, 2 & 3.
- A Group may only apply for funding once during each round, and funding can only be sought for activities occurring within that same round – if you're late too bad!
- Proof that funding from the previous round was spent must be supplied during the next round in the form of receipts – keep your receipts always, if you have no receipt it didn't happen!
- If the Group did not spend the requested funding in a previous round, then the difference will be subtracted from the amount requested in the current round – so Group's should not be able to accumulate funds over time!
- When applying for funding, all sources of funding for each activity must be declared including funds solicited from the Department and funds paid by the students themselves – so the Group cannot 'cheat' the system by applying for funding twice through the Department and UMPA

Ok, these rough rules sound intimidating. But rules can be broken to some extent. UMPA is generally very helpful with funding and rarely refuses reasonable requests. Finally, UMPA intend that funding be requested before activities occur but will also reimburse for activities that have already past (within the current round). Hence it is possible (but not preferred by UMPA) to request for funding for a round at the end of the round.

### 3.2 Departmental Funding

Departmental funding is far less structured than that provided by UMPA. There are no fixed agreements about when and how much funding can be requested by the CSSEPG – theoretically it could be anytime and 'any' amount – of course common-sense should be applied here (i.e. the powerful rule “don't burn your bridges” and the fact that Departmental funding is in general very limited).

Additionally there are no hard and fast rules as to what kinds of activities can be funded by the Department. But as a general rule-of-thumb, academic-oriented activities will have greater success than social events.

The process for procuring Department funding for an activity is by literally asking the HoD whether the Department can fund an event. Describe the event, the number of students & staff benefiting, the costs, etc. Do not be demanding, anything the Department provides is a 'bonus'.

If possible seek funding from UMPA rather than from the Department. Funds are already allocated to the Group by UMPA and the range of activities fundable through UMPA are broader. Perhaps think of Departmental funding as a backup source of funding, in cases when something special is being organised and funding cannot be gained from UMPA (either because the costs are too high, or because of timing).

### 3.3 Financial Records

As stated above, keep all receipts together (and if possible in some system that allows labelling of the receipts by activity for future reference). Keep records of expenditures and incoming funds. Triple check (with at least 2 executive committee members) for safety. The CSSEPG does not spend that much money that often so this process is easy in the scheme of things. When submitting financial documents to UMPA, keep the originals and send in copies.

## 4 What are the Roles of CSSEPG Committee Members?

The CSSEPG constitution [2] lists the following committee members with associated responsibilities:

1. An executive consisting of:
  - (a) the President/Chair, who shall be a postgraduate student, is the representative of CSSEPG who shall liaise with UMPA.
  - (b) the Secretary, who shall be a postgraduate student, is responsible for maintaining a current membership list, constitution and minutes of any meetings held.
  - (c) the Treasurer, who shall be a postgraduate student, is responsible for maintaining the financial records of the CSSEPG.
2. Non executive members consisting of three general representatives.

The executive is responsible for the day-to-day running of the Group, the non-executive members are basically normal members who have the opportunity to relay the sentiments of the Group's members and to have a limited say in Group decision-making – the non-executives have no *responsibilities* as such.

The exact break-down of tasks within the executive as described in the constitution above is ideal but not altogether realistic. What tends to happen (as has been experienced over several years by past members of CSSEPG executives) is that some number 1–3, but unfortunately occasionally 0, members of the executive are energetic about the CSSEPG and take care of CSSEPG jobs irrespective of their 'assigned' roles. The case of 0 energetic members should not happen if candidates are truly serious about making a difference in the Department and putting in the *small* amount of work (not even weekly) required to put words into action.

The combined workload of a reasonably competent executive totals to less than the equivalent workload of teaching 1 hour of undergraduate tutorials a week – fears of huge workloads incurred by running the CSSEPG are baseless!

## 5 The Life-cycle of a Typical Term of Office

The typical year-long life-cycle of a CSSEPG Executive Committee consists of the following activities:

<i>Time</i>	<i>Activity</i>
Late March	Annual General Meeting: The CSSEPG committee is elected.
May 1st	UMPA Round 3 Funding: Applications for UMPA Postgraduate Group Round 3 (1 Jan – 1 May) funding are due.
Aug 31st	UMPA Round 1 Funding: Applications for UMPA Postgraduate Group Round 1 (1 May – 31 Aug) funding are due.
December	UMPA Round 2 Funding: Applications for UMPA Postgraduate Group Round 2 (1 Sep – End academic year) funding are due before the SGS closes for the year.
December	Christmas Party: The CSSEPG often runs some kind of XMas BBQ before the 25th.
Early March	Postgraduate Inductions: Many postgraduates begin at the start of March, have some kind of Departmental induction where a CSSEPG representative should be present.
Late March	Annual General Meeting: The CSSEPG committee's term is over – mortality resumes!

In addition to these fixed activities that mostly follow UMPA reaffiliation and funding deadlines, other more optional activities may go on throughout the year:

- Random social events:
  - Hot food lunches (traditionally delivered pizza), run 3–5 times per year
  - Weekly BYO lunch sessions where students have lunch together (e.g. in the Department's boardroom!!)
  - Group sports, chess
- Academic events:
  - Seminar series' (e.g. the Machine Learning & Data Mining Reading Group)
  - Research group lunchtime chats (e.g. the Complex Systems Group)

- Funding:
  - Requesting funding from the Department (at irregular times)
  - Distributing funding to students as reimbursement for relevant activities

## 6 Executive Committee Resources

As discussed above, the CSSEPG executive committee can expect 'reasonable' support from UMPA and various Departmental staff (the HoD, postgraduate coordinators, office staff, etc.) in the form of in-kind services and funding. The committee also has access to various infrastructure resources set in place by previous years' committees:

- A CSSEPG webpage with URL <http://www.cs.mu.oz.au/pgrad> and UNIX path `/local/dept/w3/unsupported/docs/pgrad` on the student machines and is write-restricted to a special CSSEPG executive UNIX group – membership in this group should be updated each year (and should include the postgraduate seminar coordinators as the postgraduate seminar series' webpage is located within this directory)
- A CSSEPG executive email alias `cssepg` at `cs.mu.oz.au`
- An ICT level 4 mailbox labelled "CSD Group" located outside the CSSE general office (key held by the current president)
- A cheque book account whose signatories should be updated each year to include the current Treasurer (at least, and possibly also the President to guard against leave of absences)

## 7 What a 'Good' Committee Should & Should not be Expected to do

Different committees will have different ideas as to what responsibilities they are required to fulfil, and about what activities they really *should* organise given the time and funds available. And on the other hand, members of the CSSEPG, UMPA and the Department may also have (typically few) expectations of the CSSEPG and its committee's performance. As a bare minimum, the CSSEPG should:

1. Follow the Group's and UMPA's constitutions
2. Ensure that the Group is reaffiliated to UMPA each year
3. Ensure that the Group does not over-spend and that funding is sought to reimburse all expenditures
4. Go to every effort in granting member requests for funding of activities relevant to the Group's goals
5. Go to reasonable efforts in responding to requests for representation

Point 5 warrants further discussion. Given the presence of postgraduate representatives on Department committees, certain matters should be passed on to these representatives who have a more formal relationship with the Department.

Additional to the above minimal requirements, the executive should also go to efforts in organising academic and social events (at least a few during their term), and/or helping others in doing so. The Group is not just about representation, it largely aims to improve the atmosphere for postgraduates in the Department by making it more a friendly and stimulating place to be.

### 7.1 Long-term CSSEPG Goals

Here is a long-term wish list of milestones for the CSSEPG – add and remove items as the Group reaches for new goals and achieves old ones:

1. CSSEPG process improvement – the evolution of ad-hoc activities (such as weekly BYO lunches, pizza lunches, xmas BBQs) that have proven to be successes in the past, into a routine that requires minimal energy on the part of any individual executive member. Incorporate these processes into this guide.
2. Directed exploration of new activities such as:

- (a) trivia nights
- (b) video/movie nights
- (c) dinners out
- (d) guest seminars
- (e) short seminar series with the goal of educating attendees on a new theme in Computer Science
- (f) formation of short-term research groups
- (g) a modest Group-run Departmental (perhaps monthly) newsletter including all the news that's fit to print (including all publications from the last month, awards, appearances in the media, issues of concern, interviews, news clippings from other tech-related news services like those run by the ACM, etc)

With the aim of building up a programme of activities that rival those of sister societies such as the Physics and Mathematics societies which are well-known for their broad variety of successful events and services.

3. The postgraduate seminar series:
  - (a) A regular postgraduate seminar series – at well over 52 research postgraduates, 1 talk per year for each student would easily achieve a weekly series. This could involve changes to culture at all levels within the Department, but would have the immense benefit of providing students with the training in communication skills they deserve.
  - (b) A 'good' consistent attendance at seminars. This would have the important benefit of an improved collegial atmosphere.
4. A CSSEPG service for welcoming new postgraduates as soon as they begin in the Department (rather than weeks later through an induction) – for research postgraduates this could involve one-on-one type meetings as these students start at odd times, for coursework students it could involve a short presentation.

## References

- [1] University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association. UMPA Constitution, 2003. <http://www.umpa.unimelb.edu.au/about/>.
- [2] Computer Science & Software Engineering Postgraduate Group. CSSEPG Constitution, 2004. <http://www.cs.mu.oz.au/pgrad/admin/affiliation/constitution.html>.
- [3] University of Melbourne Postgraduate Association. UMPA Association Policy – Section 2.1 Student Support, 2003. <http://www.umpa.unimelb.edu.au/about/policy-pdf/>.