



MOTION REGARDING AMENDMENTS TO THE EQUITY POLICY TO ENSURE EQUITABLE COMMUNICATIONS PRACTICES 2020-09-24

Submitted for: 2020-09-24

| | | | |
|----------------------|--|------------------------|--|
| Submitted to: | SSMU Legislative Council | Document no.: | LEG-PUB-MOT-2020-09-24-001 (to be assigned by Steering) |
| Moved by: | Brooklyn Frizzle <i>Vice-President (University Affairs)</i> | Current Status: | <input type="checkbox"/> FOR APPROVAL <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> APPROVED <input type="checkbox"/> POSTPONED <input type="checkbox"/> COMMITTED <input type="checkbox"/> NOT APPROVED |
| Seconded by: | Libby Williamson <i>Arts Representative</i> | | |

Issue

This motion seeks to amend the Equity Policy to ensure that the SSMU's communications practices are accessible and anti-oppressive. These amendments would solidify the SSMU's position against tone-policing and prioritize the use of accessible language.

Background and Rationale

On November 28, 2019, [Motion Regarding Acceptable Communications Practices](#)¹ was passed by the Legislative Council and later ratified by the Board of Directors. The Motion, which has since expired, resolved that the SSMU Executives would no longer use profanity in all official SSMU Communications and would refrain from using other milder words that have the same vulgar connotation as profanity in an attempt to circumvent the aforementioned stipulation.

In 2016, the McGill Daily published an [article](#)² voicing the concerns of female SSMU Executives who felt the need to self-censor or risk being tone-policed

¹ Motion Regarding Acceptable Communications Practices 2019-11-28:
<https://ssmu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2019/12/Motion-Regarding-Acceptable-Communications-Practices-2019-11-28-APPROVED.pdf?x21981>

² Female SSMU executives decry tone-policing in student politics, *The McGill Daily* 2016-04-04:
<https://www.mcgilldaily.com/2016/04/female-ssmu-executives-decry-tone-policing-in-student-politics/>



or shut down for conduct that would go unnoticed in their male counterparts.

In this context, tone policing is a personal attack and anti-debate tactic predicated on criticizing an individual for expressing emotion. Tone policing attempts to refute the validity of a statement by attacking the tone or language with which it was presented rather than the message itself.

The SSMU has been further denounced for its [inaccessibility](#)³ and the steep learning curve associated with participating in SSMU governance. The SSMU's communications practices are notoriously inaccessible, relying heavily on jargon and overly technical language. These practices, compounded with the SSMU's standards for professionalism, have routinely alienated SSMU Members and reinforced the [recognized barriers](#)⁴ to their participation in SSMU Governance.

Alignment with Mission

This motion is in line with the SSMU's mandate to promote a functional, anti-oppressive environment through, as defined by **Article 1 – Interpretation** of the Equity Policy, and all of subsections thereof.

Consultations Completed

This motion was drafted in consultation with the Executive Committee and the Equity Commissioners. The amendments herein are, furthermore, presented with the consent of the Equity Commissioners.

Risk Factors and Resource Implications

The current status quo poses a significant social and professional risk to marginalized and oppressed peoples who face censure for their use of language that would otherwise go unnoticed when used by individuals in positions of privilege. Furthermore, the SSMU's current communications rely heavily on technical and legal jargon, an inaccessible practice that has the potential to alienate SSMU Members.

The adoption of a stance against tone-policing and inaccessible language could foreseeably damage the SSMU's professional image.

³ Campus Conversation: How can SSMU regain students' trust?, *The McGill Tribune* 2017-03-28:

<https://www.mcgilltribune.com/opinion/campus-conversation-how-can-ssmu-regain-students-trust-12131/>

⁴ SSMU Positions Book 2020-04-02: <https://ssmu.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/SSMU-Positions-Book-2020-04-02.pdf?x21981>



Sustainability Considerations

The proposed amendments serve to increase the social sustainability of SSMU's practices and promote a strong, safe and empowering community by endeavouring to minimize systemic power imbalances within society and foster a culture of anti-oppression, as outlined in section 3.2 of the Sustainability Policy.

Impact of Decision and Next Steps

Without a motion ensuring equitable communications practices in the SSMU, the potential for SSMU members in leadership roles, especially those from marginalized and oppressed communities, to experience tone policing may persist. Furthermore, the inaccessibility of SSMU communications may continue.

Should this motion pass, the Equity Commissioners and Judicial Board will be advised that effective immediately, any sanctions imposed by the SSMU or any of its representatives based on profanity or informality shall constitute a violation of the Equity Policy, so long as the language in question does not itself constitute a violation of the Equity Policy.

Motion or Resolution for Approval

Be it resolved, that the amendment in **Appendix A : Amendment to the Equity Policy** be added to **Article 1 – Interpretation** of the Equity Policy;

Be it lastly resolved, that the SSMU regrets past instances of tone-policing and inaccessibility.

Results of the Vote

| | |
|-----------|------|
| In favour | (15) |
| Opposed | (0) |
| Abstain | (4) |



Appendix A : Amendment to the Equity Policy

Article 1 – Interpretation

1.5 The SSMU recognizes that, historically, language has been used both to empower and to silence marginalized and oppressed peoples. To that effect, the SSMU commits to ensuring that its communications practices are inclusive, accessible, and anti-oppressive, respecting diverse language styles and methods of communication.

1.5.1. As such, no sanctions may be imposed by the SSMU or any of its representatives for the use of profanity or informal language with the following conditions:

- a) this protection should be applied in such a way as to ensure that profanity can be used expressively to illustrate severity or evoke emotion;
- b) notwithstanding, **1.5.1.** does not extend to any conduct that would itself constitute a violation of the Equity Policy including, but not limited to, hate speech, harassment, discrimination, abusive language, or personal attacks;
- c) the use of profanity is, furthermore, discouraged in office settings and must be accompanied by a content warning in published communications.

1.5.5. Lastly, the SSMU commits to the use of accessible, plain-spoken language, avoiding jargon and overly technical language in published communications. This shift shall be implemented systematically under the joint supervision of the Vice-President (Internal Affairs) and the Speaker.