



NEW JCR CONSTITUTION

COMMITTEE POLICY VS REFERENDUM POLICY

The JCR approved a new constitution on the 24th of November 2020. There will now be two kinds of JCR policy – Committee Policy and Referendum Policy. What's the difference between these two kinds of policy, and what are they for?

What is Policy?

JCR Policy lays out the official principle/course of action of the JCR, or its position on various affairs. Policy can build on the constitution to define various JCR procedures¹, or express the will of the JCR in an official format.

There are two kinds of policy (Committee Policy and Referendum Policy) that have different ways of coming into being and will tend to have different remits.

Committee Policy

Committee Policy is installed by the JCR Committee at a JCR meeting. It can be edited easily, by majority vote at a JCR Committee meeting, and does not elapse (instead it should be continually reviewed and edited). Its aims are to:

- define procedures not covered by the constitution;
- set out long-term aims of the JCR.

The intended benefits are to:

- give the JCR policy to fall back on to deal with issues consistently;
- improve JCR Committee institutional memory and transparency by stipulating some of the meeting/financial/advertising/decision-making processes it has;
- allow the JCR to elaborate on the constitution without having needing referenda;
- give the JCR scope to think on timelines over 1-year.

Committee Policy is contained in 'documents' that cover various topics or themes, and the policy, along with any amendments to policy must be displayed for JCR members to see. This will be done via QJCR.org.uk.

Although JCR Committee Policy is set by the JCR Committee, any JCR member may suggest JCR Committee Policy and attend a JCR Committee Meeting where they can propose an amendment or addition.

Example JCR Committee Policy documents might be:

¹ e.g. meetings, elections, funding, advertising, events

- **JCR Meetings** – the procedures for voting, apologies, minutes, chairing etc.
- **JCR Mailing List** – what the JCR allows to be distributed on its mailing list.
- **Accessibility** – guidelines for the accessibility actions needed for JCR events.
- **JCR Referenda** – guidelines for Returning Officers on how to ensure a fair debate in advance of a JCR referendum.
- **JCR Funds** – procedures for the Treasurer for managing finances effectively and transparently.

Referendum Policy

Referendum policy exists to:

- assert the will of the JCR membership, in particular on important issues where a wider vote is deemed appropriate;
- override Committee Policy, if the JCR membership are dissatisfied².

JCR Referendum Policy lasts 2 years and overrides Committee Policy where there is a clash.

Referenda can be triggered either by the JCR Committee or by a petition of JCR members. The motion of the referendum has a specific beginning to install Referendum Policy. For full details, see the JCR Constitution on the JCR website.

What Happened in the Past?

The old (2015-2020) JCR Constitution had policy which was voted on at open meetings. This policy would last three years. This policy was wildly variable in scope (anywhere between 'the JCR should ask for a bike cull/update the website' through to 'the JCR supports a ban on beef served in the Buttery').

We didn't feel like the minor questions really needed policy, and that these motions cheapened policy and cluttered our list of policy. We also felt that open meetings that barely managed a quorum of 30 people (over half of which could be JCR Committee anyway) were appropriate for the 'big' motions.

Most policy was either quickly actioned, became irrelevant anyway or was left and ignored.

Given all of this, and other problems solved by Committee Policy (consistency, institutional memory, transparency), the JCR resolved to reform policy in its constitutional review of 2020.

Examples

The following examples are designed to demonstrate best practice with regards to setting the correct policy. The limited remit of the JCR Committee is also demonstrated. It should be noted that these are guidelines only and that there is no rule about what a JCR member could propose for referendum.

² This doesn't mean that the JCR Committee can't propose Referendum Policy, which they may do if they feel that a wider mandate would be helpful.

(1) Ruminant meat in the Buttery

If a student, maybe a JCR Committee member, wanted to see ruminant meat reduced or not sold in the Buttery for environmental reasons, this might be something significant enough that the whole JCR should be engaged via a referendum.

However, since the JCR does not run the Catering Department, which has other stakeholders (staff, guests, MCR, fellows), the motion would be best written for the JCR to 'support' or 'lobby for' a ban.

(2) JCR Budget

If a JCR member felt strongly that the budget of the JCR should be available for JCR members to be seen, then they might like to first ask the JCR Committee to add this to JCR Committee Policy. If dissatisfied, they could then apply Referendum Policy. One should note that the JCR still might not be able to do this e.g. if the Senior Treasurer of the College Union stepped in.

(3) JCR Room

Before COVID-19 times, there was no means of booking the JCR Room (only the TV in there). Not everyone was on the same page, so the JCR could use JCR Committee Policy to lay out the rules of the room. The JCR Committee could always change this if they felt it necessary, and a petition triggering a referendum for Referendum Policy to overrule this could be actioned if enough people disagreed with the JCR Committee.

(4) Gender-neutral Toilets

If a JCR Committee wanted to establish the long-term aim of having all public bathrooms in Queens' be gender-neutral ('urinals & cubicles' vs 'cubicles only' rather than 'men' vs 'women') then this could be installed as JCR Committee Policy. Referendum Policy might be useful if instead there is a specific proposal to alter various bathrooms in the college.

(5) Advertising on the JCR mailing list or Facebook group

The JCR is asked to advertise multiple events, opportunities and activities from within the college, Cambridge or further afield. The JCR will likely refuse requests on the basis of not 'spamming' its members. To protect the JCR Communications Officer or Secretary from allegations of favouritism, and to ensure consistency across the Committee and across years, JCR Committee Policy could be set laying out a consistent plan e.g. advertising Queens'/Cambridge student-run events/notices only on the newsletter, allowing Queens' societies only to use the mailing list (on an infrequent basis) etc.

A Final Word of Warning...

Just because something is JCR policy, doesn't mean it then happens. The JCR Committee must be conscientious and reliable and should ensure that policy is actioned and well-kept.

It's almost always best to simply ask the JCR Committee to do something first, and for the JCR Committee to keep good relationships with staff and fellows. Quite often, you don't need a referendum to get something done!

Tomos Wood
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