

A statement in favour of motion DS1*

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Abstract

Motion DS1 states:

That UK-TUG be dissolved, and that its remaining assets be transferred in accordance with Clause 5(3)(b) of the Constitution in two equal parts to:

(i) TeX Users Group (TUG), and

(ii) Deutschsprachige Anwendervereinigung TeX e.V. (DANTE).

This statement gives my argument in favour of the motion.

A little history[†]

I started using \LaTeX in 1986, first on a terminal linked to a minicomputer, and later on a PC. I didn't, though, have any involvement with the \TeX community until a UK-TUG speaker meeting held in Oxford in the new millennium, addressed by Don Knuth himself. The meeting was very popular, with over a hundred people in attendance. By then, I was a member of UK-TUG.

Some time afterwards, I received a circular email from the Chair of UK-TUG, asking for a volunteer to take on the role of Treasurer. I volunteered, and took over as Treasurer in 2005–06 with the intention of serving a maximum of five years.

It soon became apparent that, behind the glossy veneer, there were some problems.

*This statement has been typeset using the Lucida font package.

[†]Much of this historical account is based on recollections rather than documentary evidence. I believe that it is substantially accurate, but would be happy to accept corrections on detailed matters of fact.

We couldn't pay our bills

It might seem surprising that we couldn't pay our bills, given that we had over £10,000 in the bank. But that was the problem: the money was stuck in the bank and we couldn't use it. The former Treasurer, an authorized account signatory, was no longer available, and one of the other signatories was no longer a committee member. I remember negotiating to confirm that we would still be supplied with T_EX Collection disks, on the understanding that we would soon have our finances operational again and be able to pay for them.

We were, in the end, able to complete a bank mandate form and arrange for new signatories to the account. I don't believe that there have been any significant problems relating to our bank account since that time.

We didn't know what our constitution said

Motions regarding UK-TUG business had always needed to be considered at quorate face-to-face meetings, and these had often been difficult to achieve. To help resolve this difficulty, a motion proposing a reduction in the quorum had been considered at the well-attended meeting in Oxford.

Unfortunately the Secretary's notes of that meeting had suffered water damage after a domestic problem, and were unreadable. So we had Schrödinger's motion. A vote had been taken, and either the motion had been approved, or else it had been rejected. But we had no definitive way of knowing what the result of the vote had been.

In the end, the Committee prepared a new constitution incorporating a provision for business to be conducted by electronic means. This new constitution was approved overwhelmingly by members at the 2008 AGM. That's the constitution we're using today.

A close shave?

Might UK-TUG have been in danger of folding thirteen or fourteen years ago? I don't seriously think so. The problems were operational rather than existential, and we were able to solve them. We were still active in several ways, such as holding speaker meetings combined with AGMs, resurrecting the UK-TUG magazine 'Baskerville', running L^AT_EX training sessions, and giving some money to worthwhile projects.

I recall, though, that Committee discussions during the five years I was Treasurer were—how shall I put this—'argumentative'. Things don't seem to have changed too much in that respect.

The present situation

Things have, however, changed in other respects. I see that the minutes of the AGM held in November 2018 state:

JW asked the meeting to consider the ‘direction’ of UK-TUG in the future. He noted that with no nominations for Chair and no new committee members, running the group falls on a small, fixed, number of people. He also linked to discussion at TUG2018 concerning the question of what ‘user’ groups are for: new end users are very unlikely to join.

Indeed the advent of social media, video conferencing and the like has made the question of what we’re ‘for’ even more important. While UK-TUG as an institution seems to be essentially moribund, individuals with interest and energy can readily step into the breach. Look, for example, at the Zoom T_EX Hour held regularly by Jonathan Fine for much of this year. The underlying paraphernalia of an organization with a constitution and a committee (let alone an argumentative committee) is clearly unnecessary for this to work, and work well.

Even if members felt that some form of lightweight association would be valuable, it seems to me that a far cleaner solution would be to start again from scratch. I’m sure this could be done relatively quickly.

On the other hand, the proposal in motion HV1, that UK-TUG amend its constitution to become such a lightweight association, seems unlikely to produce a resolution in the foreseeable future. Such a change would necessarily alter the objectives of UK-TUG, and would open the floodgates to an interminable theological debate on whether such a change was, as required by our present constitution, ‘within the reasonable contemplation of the members of UK-TUG’. I fear that expecting such a change to be implemented any time soon would represent the triumph of hope over experience.

What about the money?

The question of dissolution and the consequent distribution of funds was considered at the AGM held in November 2019. Motion 7 stated:

That if Motion 6 [a dissolution motion] is passed, any remaining funds after liabilities have been discharged should be distributed to TUG and DANTE to further support TeX activities.

The minutes of the AGM report:

DC stated that he had picked the two groups in the motion for clear reasons: CTAN support from DANTE in particular helping all T_EX users. He also felt members needed some idea of where funds would go. SD supported the idea that these groups are reasonable given their aims.

Motion 7 was passed by 20 votes to 8, with 7 abstentions; but it was contingent on Motion 6, which did not pass, and so its conclusion is not binding. It should, nevertheless, inform the present discussion. It is also worth noting that motion HV1 before the present meeting also proposes '*donating dormant resources to TUG and DANTE*'.

An alternative approach is suggested in motion JF1, that the remaining funds should be distributed '*in proportion to the individually expressed wishes of members*'. It seems to me that this ignores the fact that these funds arise largely from membership subscriptions collected over a period of twenty years or more, and that by subscribing our members (past and present) have entrusted UK-TUG to make wise decisions on the allocation of the money to further the Group's objectives. Whereas TUG and DANTE have similar objectives to UK-TUG, and may (I believe) also be entrusted to act wisely, the approach proposed in motion JF1 would require a complicated voting mechanism, with Committee assessment of individual choices for conformity with the constitution. That would be a tall order, even for a Committee with an exemplary record of cooperation.

Conclusion

If you have read all of the above, then thank you for your attention. I hope that you will have been persuaded to cast a vote in favour of motion DS1. I also hope that you will have been persuaded:

- to vote against motion HV1, because a constitution and committee, even if diminished in scope, need additional effort and are no longer really necessary, and that if a lightweight association were felt to be needed then constitutionally it would be far easier to start again from scratch;
- to vote against motion JF1, because that needs a complicated procedure and I believe that we can instead trust TUG and DANTE to use our remaining funds for the good of the T_EX community as a whole; and
- to vote against motion JF2, because that just prolongs the agony to no good effect.

I shall, of course, be happy to answer questions on the specific points made in this statement. I'd prefer, though, not to enter into a long discussion of the issues. It seems to me that it is now time for members to reflect upon those issues for themselves, and to vote accordingly.