

# REVIEW: DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR & GSA POSTGRADUATE FORUM

10<sup>th</sup> March 2010



## REVIEW: DEPUTY VICE-CHANCELLOR & GSA POSTGRADUATE FORUM

### Foreword

The Graduate Students' Association appreciate that it is vital that the University is aware of the views and concerns of postgraduate students' and that we connect with our membership to ensure we accurately represent these views at university level. Discussion forums are one approach which can be used to make this connection. This report reviews our first Postgraduate Forum, held in collaboration with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, on the 10<sup>th</sup> March 2010.

### Background

The Graduate Students' Association is an independent body which exists to represent postgraduate students at the University of York. We are the primary representative body for postgraduates on a wide variety of University Committees, focusing on issues including Teaching & Learning, Student Welfare, and Campus Services. As our membership consists of nearly a quarter of the student body, it is vital that we connect with our members and accurately express their views when communicating with the University.

With the cooperation of Professor Trevor Sheldon, Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the GSA organised a Postgraduate Forum, which took place on 10<sup>th</sup> March 2010. This was the first forum of its' kind here at York, and encouraged all postgraduates to take the opportunity to voice their opinions on all aspects of the Postgraduate Student Experience in the company of those who can make a difference. Our objective was to run an informal session gathering feedback on a wide range of subjects, including but not restricted to Teaching & Learning Provision, Assessment & Feedback, the postgraduate application process, campus accommodation, campus services, careers & skill development, research provision, finance, PGWT Strategy, as well as feedback on the service the GSA provides. The event was promoted as being co-hosted by the Deputy Vice-Chancellor and GSA, and through this connection we were fortunate to receive the backing of academic departments and members of University Teaching Committee and Standing Committee on Assessment. We were also fortunate to have the GTU represented at the session by Dr Jen Winter and Commercial Services represented by Mr David Sharp.



The feedback that we gathered, both verbally and from questionnaires, was recorded and analysed, and will be used to inform future GSA strategy. This review contains an action plan; detailing the issues that were raised, and how we will look at addressing these concerns.

### Promotion

The event was promoted to all postgraduates through the following mechanisms:

- Email to departments from Linda Brosnan, PA to the Deputy Vice-Chancellor
- Email to departments from Professor Alastair Fitter, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research
- Email to Postgraduate Department Representatives from the GSA Academic Affairs Officer
- Email to all postgraduate college members from each college administrator
- Email to all Graduate Common Room Committees from the GSA Services Officer
- Email to YUSU Sabbatical Officers and GSA Council members
- Email to Wentworth College Provost and College Tutors
- Inclusion within the GSA Newsletter
- Facebook event created and invitation sent to all members of the York GSA Facebook group
- Inclusion within the Events section of York Extra
- Postering throughout campus

We contacted the Campus Media outlets several times yet had no response. The GSA Academic Affairs Officer has since had discussions with York Vision, The Yorker, and Nouse concerning this, and lack of inclusion in these outlets will be addressed for future events.

### Turnout

Around fifty postgraduates attended the event. It was pleasing to see a diverse range of our membership represented; including international students, student parents, and distance learners.

### Forum Schedule

Attendees were greeted by GSA representatives on arrival and handed a folder containing forum information and relevant documentation from the Association. Prior to the informal session, an introductory message was given by the Academic Affairs Officer Kieran Alden on behalf of the GSA and Professor Trevor Sheldon on behalf of the University. The motivation behind both talks was to stress the importance of postgraduate representation at university level. An hour long informal feedback session was then held, with attendees divided into groups of seven or eight, with discussion facilitated by a member of the GSA committee. Concluding remarks were given by Matthew Glover, Chair of GSA Association Council, and Rui Huang, GSA President; with the focus of both being to encourage postgraduates to communicate and become involved in the GSA.



After the session, we collected two questionnaires from participants; one to evaluate the forum and the second to gather feedback on the GSA. The results to the former can be seen in the appendices of this review.

## Discussions

### - *Teaching and Learning*

#### ○ Taught Postgraduates

Though as anticipated, opinion on the taught postgraduate experience varied across departments, concerns with timetabling of lectures/seminars was highlighted throughout departments. For students needing to plan childcare, the timetable is released far too late, and late alterations cause further problems. The overwhelming thought was that the timetable issued by many departments is not easy to interpret. There were also numerous examples of lectures being arranged to be consecutive, yet in locations that are a long distance apart.

Also common across courses was the feeling that induction information given prior to enrolment was generally poor, and that there is a need for departments to consult with students on how this could be improved.

The standard of feedback, and the students' expectation of this standard, was also highly varied. Some students were very satisfied and commended their department on both the turnaround time and the quality of the comments they received. However this was not the case across all departments. There were examples where assignments were not returned within six weeks, and comments did not help with understanding why the mark was awarded. Some students had access to the grading criteria used by those marking assessments, but a larger number did not. An area of concern for many students was that they did not receive any indication of how they are performing on the course until after the



Christmas break. Many would like to see formative assessments built in to the first term, especially those who have been out of education for a while.

Use of the VLE seems widespread across departments, and many attendees saw this as a useful tool and would encourage further use. Students would like to see all module information and materials uploaded onto the VLE, and this to become the central resource; rather than shared drives and lecturers personal web sites.

International students on taught courses expressed concern at their lack of understanding of the UK/University exam procedure. Suggestions were made that mock examinations would remove some of these concerns and make them more comfortable in the real examination. There also seemed to be little awareness of the language support that is offered by the university for those who may need it.

#### ○ Research Students

The vast majority of research students present believed that the university has a strong commitment to research students across the campus; with the Berrick Saul building proving this. Those represented would like to see clarification of the relationship a research student should expect to have with their supervisor, and what can be done if this expectation is not met. The vast majority understood that they had a research budget allocated to them, but were

unsure of how much this was, and how to monitor how much of this has been spent. There was also a desire to attend some of the undergraduate modules, yet many were unsure if this was possible.

For those of which students were aware, the public/department lectures were seen as events which the university should be publicising much more widely. Many had found out about such events once the date had passed.

#### - ***Postgraduates who Teach***

Valuable feedback was collected from Postgraduates' who teach, which will inform discussions our PGWT rep is having with the university PGWT working group. The lack of standardisation in terms of the support given to PGWTs across departments was highlighted. In terms of the new PGWT strategy consultation, some felt that it was unfair to give varying pay levels that don't reflect hours worked or effort expended. Those involved in teaching also believed that PGWTs ought to have the learning objectives and outcomes for the module they are teaching already set by a member of academic staff. This is essential to ensure quality of teaching. The current mechanisms in place to monitor the standard of teaching given by PGWT's also need to be improved.



#### - ***Library***

The University Library is the focus of much of the regular feedback the Academic Affairs Officer receives from our members. While the association recognises that the library is currently being refurbished, the interim plans which have been implemented are concerning our membership. Many attendees noted that they were unaware of the library refurbishment plan and of alternative study spaces available while the refurbishment is taking place. This is a known concern, and the GSA and YUSU have been working with the Library Committee and the Library Refurbishment Steering Group to ensure communication is clearer and alternative study spaces are advertised.

Some taught masters students also noted that they have some problems accessing the key-texts for their course. These concerns will be raised with the relevant departments' Academic Liaison Librarians.

#### - ***Campus Services***

Though postgraduate students work throughout the year, it was felt that the campus operates to fit the needs of just the undergraduate student body who work on ten week terms. Though over a quarter of the student body may still be on campus out of term-time, it was noted that the opening hours of the supermarket, restaurants and campus bars are all radically reduced.

The GSA and other relevant stakeholders are involved in discussions with Commercial Services on the future of bars on campus. Postgraduate students who do not live on campus noted that they do not feel encouraged to return in the

evening to visit the bars as the prices are not competitive. However most were open to coming onto campus in the evening if this is addressed.

#### - **Careers & Skill Development**

A large majority of the attendees stated they were unaware of how to access the services provided by the Careers Service. From their replies, it would seem that access to the service is not incorporated into the information they receive from the department. Though students know that they exist, they also said that GTU courses also suffered from the latter issue, and that if these courses were better publicised, they would be more likely to undertake them. However, some suggested that the courses need streaming, offering students interested in theory, pedagogy and with an interest in more in depth training the opportunity to receive it. This was seen as an issue for all courses which are gimmicky and theory light, but a particular example was the equality module. Social science students who were present noted that they have existing knowledge on this and the course was basic and patronising. It was felt that the people teaching the courses did not have the experience/qualifications required to teach that course, that they were a distraction and, for PGWT related courses, that they did not palpably improve the quality of teaching students delivered.



No student at the session was aware of either the Personal Development Program (PDP) or Postgraduate York Award.

For PhD students, it became clear that there is no standardised approach to the role transferrable skills training plays within PhD training. Some departments work to the standard that all students should do ten hours of transferable skills training a year, but may not widely or effectively communicate to the students or enforce this, whereas others work to a points system where each student must undertake enough training to hit a points target. From discussions at this session, it would seem departments do need to clarify this with their students.

#### - **Accommodation**

The application process for campus accommodation was generally very poorly received. Many students were unhappy at the turnaround time from application to result, and the short amount of time left between receiving no offer of accommodation and the beginning of their course. There seemed to be a widely held belief that all postgraduates would be given a place in Wentworth and not any other college on campus. It was also noted that the application form was very difficult to complete for those with disabilities.

Concerning welfare support provided by the college, the vast majority of those who live on campus did not know who their College Tutors are and how they can be contacted. Many female students also felt that there should be more all-female postgraduate flats as exist for undergraduates in other colleges on campus.

Though it was noted that maintenance support for rooms on campus was generally good, several students have found damaged furniture when they moved into their accommodation. There was also a general feeling throughout those who live in Wentworth that the rooms and kitchens are not sufficiently cleaned, and that the laundry facilities are not fit for purpose.



#### - ***Student Welfare***

Feedback on the service provided by the health centre was generally very positive. However, a large majority of international students highlighted their concerns with locating a pharmacy and collecting prescriptions, especially just after arrival in York.

Security was a concern for all attendees, with many noting that they do not feel the presence of the security service on campus. No student who was asked could recall the contact number to use to call the security service should they need to.

Many students would like the university to improve the lighting between from campus to Catherine House, Halifax College, and Goodricke College. The same concern was raised concerning the lighting around the emergency phone on the sports field.

#### - ***Graduate Students' Association***

The vast majority of those present had some understanding of the services offered by the GSA, though this may be skewed as the Academic Affairs Officer spoke of these in the introductory remarks. The main concern of attendees was the way the GSA communicates with our membership. Though understanding the role of our officers, there was very little awareness of what each officer has achieved during their term in office. The forum was seen as a positive move by attendees, and it was suggested that such engagement should be repeated more often; possibly through following the ISA's example and running an informal coffee afternoon for postgraduates. Engagement of membership via text-messaging was also suggested as a solution.

Those who had attended Association Council, the body which oversees the running of the GSA, notes that the event is far too long, too formal, and does not encourage postgraduates to attend future sessions. Having a more informal set-up, where our membership are encouraged to speak to our officers on a more social level, was suggested as an improvement.

In general, many commented that Welcome Week was a fantastic success and helped make the first week much easier for all who arrived in York. Improvements to information concerning GSA Sport were suggested, as many paid the sports centre membership prior to finding out they did not need to do this to take part in GSA sport.

The skills courses arranged by the GSA, YUSU, and Academic Support Office during Academic Integrity week were well received, and many asked that these be repeated before they commence their dissertation/theses.

Some attendees still found the GSA to be too Wentworth centric, and that provision for and communication with those who live off campus, study part-time, complete distance learning courses, and are mature students needs addressing. Those who do not live on campus had no knowledge of the facilities within Wentworth that they can access as postgraduate students.

From those who completed the questionnaire, 63% say they have been to at least one GSA evening event. There was a general feeling that the Friday night events should be organised, yet be more varied to reflect our diverse membership. Promotion of events was deemed quite poor. There are also no evening events organised for those who are living off-campus.

#### - **Other Concerns**

Around half the students were aware that they are a member of YUSU as well as a member of the GSA. However, they do not find YUSU as approachable as the GSA; finding the services and events focused too heavily on those between the ages of 18 and 21. They were also unaware of the 'Magic Bus' service operated by YUSU.



With concerns raised over the availability of key-texts, many students suggested establishing a second-hand book sale service, operated either by the university, YUSU, or the GSA, so the books they no longer use could be easily sold to those who need them next year.

#### **Future Plans**

The GSA plans to host this event once every term. We hope to continue to run and promote this as a joint event with a member of the University Senior Management Group. Dr Jane Grenville has agreed to attend the forum next term.

Based on feedback we received from those who attended (Appendices, Forum Questionnaire Results) and GSA Representatives, we will introduce the following changes:

- Groups will be more tightly organised; ensuring there are specific topic for specific groups of students.
- The session will be longer, as many thought the session was too short.
- A Question & Answer session will be introduced at the end; allowing any attendee to question the GSA Principal Officers and the representative from the University Senior Management Group
- There will be more of an opportunity for attendees to chat informally to GSA representatives before and after the session.

## Conclusions

The Postgraduate Forum has guided our activities for the remainder of this academic year and informed our discussions on the future strategy of the GSA, while allowing us to reinforce our role at the university and giving postgraduates the opportunity to voice their opinion. From the discussions, we have generated an Action Plan detailing how the concerns will be addressed. The GSA will make this accessible to our membership and representatives will be responsible for reporting how they are addressing the points allocated to them.



We are grateful to all members of both the University and the Graduate Students' Association who ensured this session was successful. We are now much better informed of the issues facing postgraduate students and can work on addressing these concerns. We look forward to repeating this event in the near future.

## Appendices

- Action Plan
- Forum Evaluation Questionnaire: Results



## Action Plan

### Abbreviations:

UTC: University Teaching Committee

SCA: Standing Committee on Assessment

BfGS: Board for Graduate Schools

ASO: Academic Support Office

CELT: Centre for English Language Teaching

GTU: Graduate Training Unit

GSO: Graduate Schools Office

GCR: Graduate Common Room

ISA: International Students' Association

Issue	Urgency	Designated Body/ Person(s)	Potential Source(s) of Resolution
<b>Teaching &amp; Learning</b>			
<i>Taught Masters</i>			
Student timetable complicated/not released early enough for planning of childcare/not enough time given to move rooms	Short-Term	GSA Academic Affs, Dept Reps	Departments, Timetabling Office, UTC
All module information and materials should be on the VLE	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs, Dept Reps	Annual Programme Reviews, Departments, UTC
Grading criteria should be made available for all modules	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs, Dept Reps	Departments, SCA
International students unaware that language support is available if necessary	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	International Students Office, CELT
Students are unclear as to the standard of feedback they should be expecting	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs, Dept Reps	Departments, SCA
Some departments not returning feedback within six week turnaround time	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs, Dept Reps	Departments, SCA
First feedback not received until beginning of second term for some courses	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	Departments, SCA
International Students unsure of UK/York exam procedure, and would like practice or better clarification	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	Departments, GSO, SCA
Clarify whether taught postgraduates have access to the Berrick Saul desk areas if not taken by research students	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	Departments, Berrick Saul Administrator
Induction information given prior to enrolment was generally poor	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs, Dept Reps	Departments, SCA

<i>Research</i>			
Large number of PhD Students unsure on what to expect from their supervisor	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	BfGS, Departments, build into GTU course
Students unsure of where to seek support for Stafford Loan Applications	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	GSO, International Students Office
Research students would like clarity on the Undergraduate lectures they can access	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	Departments
Academic Integrity Week classes were useful – there should be more of these	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	ASO
Large number of students unaware of how their research budget is spent/how much is available/how they can spend this	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	Departments
Better advertising of public lectures/seminars across campus	Medium-Term	GSA President	Communications Office
<b>Postgraduates who Teach</b>			
Lack of standardisation across departments for supporting PGWT's	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs & PGWT Rep	PGWT Working Group, UTC
PGWT's should have access to learning objectives and outcomes for the module they are teaching	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs & PGWT Rep	PGWT Working Group, UTC
Improve mechanisms by which teaching is monitored	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs & PGWT Rep	PGWT Working Group, UTC
<b>Library</b>			
Lack of Study Space for students due to library refurbishment	Short-Term	GSA Academic Affs	Library Refurb Steering Grp, Library Committee, Better advertising of available space
Students' unaware of refurbishment plans	Short-Term	GSA Academic Affs	Library Refurb Steering Grp
Not enough key-texts available	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs, Dept Reps	Dept Liaison Librarians, Departments, Library
<b>Campus Services</b>			
Costcutter hours reduced out of term-time though postgraduates (and some undergraduates, i.e. over 25% of students) remain on campus	Medium-Term	GSA President	Commercial Services
Off-campus students not encouraged to come back onto campus to use the bars as they are not competitively priced	Medium-Term	GSA Services & Finance	Commercial Services, Bar Strategy Group

<b>Careers &amp; Skill Development</b>			
Students unaware of services available at Careers centre	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs	Careers Service & Departments
Courses available at GTU need to be publicised within departments	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs, GTU	GTU, Departments
No students had heard of PDP or Postgraduate York Award	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs,	GTU, Careers Service, Departments
No standardised approach to PhD Transferrable skills across departments/inconsistent monitoring of transferrable skills training	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs, GTU	Departments, UTC
<b>Accommodation</b>			
Residents unsure of who their College Tutor's are	Short-Term	GSA Welfare, College Provosts	College Provosts & Tutors, Pro-VC Jane Grenville
Rooms & Kitchens not sufficiently cleaned	Short-Term	College Administrators	Cleaning Services / Residents
Accommodation form difficult to complete for those with disabilities	Medium-Term	GSA Welfare & Disability Rep	Accommodation Office
Potential students lead to believe postgraduates would be given place in Wentworth	Medium-Term	GSA Welfare	Accommodation Office
Investigate the need for all-Female postgraduate flats on campus	Medium-Term	GSA Welfare & Gender Equality	Accommodation Office
Laundry facilities in Wentworth not meeting the demand	Medium-Term	GSA Welfare, College Provost	Campus Services
Furniture in rooms may not be fit for purpose / damaged	Medium-Term	GSA Welfare, College Provost	Accommodation Office
Investigate whether all on-campus accommodation should have access to the wireless network(s)	Long-Term	GSA Services	Computing Services, Accommodation Office
<b>Student Welfare</b>			
International students unsure where to collect prescriptions issued by the health centre	Short-Term	GSA Welfare	Health Centre
Security presence around campus is not felt by students	Short-Term	GSA Welfare	Health, Safety & Welfare Committee, Campus Security
Students unsure of methods to use to contact security in an emergency	Short-Term	GSA Welfare	Health, Safety & Welfare Committee, Campus Security



Improved lighting by security phones on sport fields	Medium-Term	GSA Welfare	Campus Services, Campus Security
Lighting between both Halifax and Goodricke and campus, and Catherine House and campus deemed insufficient	Medium-Term	GSA Welfare	Health, Safety & Welfare Committee, Campus Services
<b>Graduate Students' Association</b>			
Events need to be more widely publicised	Short-Term	GSA Services, Communications, Events	College Administrators, YUSU, campus media, commercial services
No events tailored for students who live off-campus	Short-Term	GSA Services, Events, Off-Campus Rep	
Improve information given to GCR Committees on budgeting events	Short-Term	GSA Services & Finance	Wentworth College Welfare team, Wentworth GCR
Students unaware of what GSA Officers have achieved this year	Short-Term	GSA President & Communications	
Noted that GSA Council is too long, too formal, not to the point, and should be more social	Short-Term	GSA Council Chair	
Improve communication to off-campus students on the campus/college facilities they have access to	Short-Term	GSA President & Communications	
Engage with membership through informal coffee afternoons in Edge (as ISA do)	Medium-Term	GSA Services	Wentworth Catering Manager
Events need to be more varied to involve a wider range of students	Medium-Term	GSA Services, Events	
Improve communication on getting involved in GSA Sports on arrival	Medium-Term	GSA Services, Sports	
GSA has no policy and little support for Distance Learners	Medium-Term	GSA Academic Affs & Distance Learning Rep	GSA Council, Distance Learning Forum
GSA has no policy and appears to offer little support to mature learners	Medium-Term	GSA President	
Students would like to know how the GSA spends their budget	Medium-Term	GSA Finance	
Engage with members through text-messaging	Long-Term	GSA Services	



Other			
Students unaware of the 'Magic Bus' service	Short-Term	GSA President	YUSU Democracy & Services
Students find it difficult to approach YUSU	Medium-Term	GSA President	YUSU President
Investigate whether the university/YUSU/GSA could offer a 2 <sup>nd</sup> hand book sale service	Long-Term	GSA President & Services	

## - Forum Evaluation Questionnaire: Results

Note: 26 people

	1 (completely disagree)	%	2	%	3	%	4	%	5 (completely agree)	%	No answer	%
The forum met with my expectations	0	0%	2	8%	4	15%	7	27%	11	42%	2	8%
The length of the forum was too long	9	34%	8	31%	5	19%	3	12%	1	4%	0	0%
I've had fun	0	0%	4	15%	5	19%	9	35%	7	27%	1	4%
I'm glad I came	1	4%	3	12%	1	4%	6	22%	15	58%	0	0%
I feel I have learnt something new	2	8%	2	8%	2	8%	10	38%	10	38%	0	0%
Overall I found it useful	1	4%	0	0%	4	16%	10	38%	11	42%	0	0%
The facilitator/s was/were excellent	3	12%	0	0%	0	0%	10	38%	13	50%	0	0%
The refreshments were of a high standard	0	0%	1	4%	4	15%	8	31%	13	50%	0	0%
The forum was well organised	0	0%	1	4%	3	12%	12	46%	10	38%	0	0%