





## YORK'S POSTGRADUATE FORUM

2<sup>nd</sup> March 2011

### Foreword

As the primary representative body for postgraduates, the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) is dedicated to providing opportunities that allow the University to be aware of the views and concerns of postgraduates studying at York. To be confident that that viewpoints put forward are an accurate representation, the GSA places great importance on connecting with our membership at a personal level.

In 2010, in collaboration with different members of the senior management team, the GSA hosted a set of postgraduate forums. These events aimed to provide postgraduates with a captive audience of members of staff and GSA representatives to whom they could voice their opinions to. The GSA uses various means to engage with and receive feedback from postgraduates; thus far the postgraduate forums have been the most effective medium for this purpose. They have resulted in shaping both university and GSA activities, informed discussions on the future strategy of the GSA and allowed the GSA to reinforce its role at the university.

This report reviews the recent Postgraduate Forum held on the 2<sup>nd</sup> March in collaboration with the Registrar and Secretary, Dr David Duncan.

I hope that you find this report informative. If you have any questions regarding anything covered within this report then please do not hesitate to contact me or one of the other Principal Officers at [info@yorkgsa.org](mailto:info@yorkgsa.org)

John Calhoun, GSA President



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## 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 the Deputy Vice-Chancellor, the GSA organised the university's first Postgraduate Forum in March 2010. This event 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 could make a difference, 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 issues raised at the event were reviewed, and an action plan generated detailing how we would work to address each case. This report was in turn submitted to a variety of university bodies and services, including Operations Group and University Teaching Committee, and has been well received across the board.

Since that first forum, we have worked in collaboration with a number of university bodies to make progress on addressing many of the issues included in this plan. Detail on what we have achieved to date can be seen in the Action Plan which is available to read on our website [www.yorkgsa.org](http://www.yorkgsa.org). This is constantly being developed in relation to the feedback that we receive to ensure our strategy is guided by those we represent.

## Promotion

The event was advertised jointly by the GSA and the University to all members of staff and postgraduates through all the available mediums.

## Turnout

Compared to the previous forums the number of postgraduates in attendance at this event was considerably smaller than usual. Despite the reduced numbers, the diverse nature of the postgraduate community was reflected as participants included both research and taught postgraduates, international students, postgraduates who teach and students with dependents.

We were also fortunate to have representatives from various university bodies in attendance; including the Careers Service, Library, Academic Support Office, Campus & Commercial Services, Wentworth College, Student Support Services, YUSU and Registry Services.

## Forum Schedule

On arrival, attendees were greeted by GSA representatives and given a forum pack. Each pack contained information regarding the forum, as well as an update from the Principal Officers and publicity for the upcoming GSA election.

It was anticipated that the event would follow the format used in the earlier forums, where those in attendance would participate in an informal feedback session covering a number of topics. These topics were loosely chosen



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before the forum and relevant members of staff were invited to facilitate the discussions. The topics set for this forum were:

- (i) 'The University' with Dr David Duncan (Registrar and Secretary), Philip Evans (University Governance Officer) and John Calhoun (GSA President)
- (ii) 'Admissions and Enrolment: Looking at the Transition to Postgraduate Study' with Rosemary Royds (Registry Services), Simon Davis (Academic Support Office) & Isha Arora (GSA Academic Affairs Officer)
- (iii) 'The Campuses: Service Provision, Catering, Sports and the Traffic Light System' with Sue Johnston (Campus Services), John Greenwood (Commercial Services) & Phil Mason (GSA Campaigns Officer)
- (iv) 'Learning Resources: Skills, Books and Peer Support' with Katy Mann (Academic Support Office), Kirstyn Radford (Library and Archives) & Bin Bin Wang (GSA Gender Equality Representative)
- (v) 'Student Support and Representation' with Jill Ellis (Student Support Office), Rachel McCormack (Wentworth College) and Ben Humphrys (YUSU Academic Affairs Officer)
- (vi) 'Enhancing the Postgraduate Community: GCRs, Events and Trips' with Tim Ngwena (YUSU President), Robin Jervis (Chair of Langwith GCR) & Ali Bostancioglu (GSA Services Officer)
- (vii) 'Careers and Skill Development: Postgraduate Employability' with Gayle Johnson (Careers) and Adam Leadbeater (GSA Finance Officer)

On the day, this format was considered inappropriate due to the level of attendance. Instead it was decided that rather than hold separate discussions, these topics would form the basis of an open and informal round the table discussion between postgraduates, GSA representatives and university staff.

The event opened with a welcome by Adam Leadbeater, GSA Finance Officer and an introduction from each of the facilitators. A two hour long informal discussion that covered various aspects of studying at postgraduate level then took place.

## Summary of Discussions

### *Employability and Skills*

As would be expected, a key theme that ran through many of the questions and queries brought to the table by postgraduates focused on employability and future opportunities. In particular there was much discussion about the skills that postgraduates require for life after studying and the need for initiatives to help them develop these.

The discussions made it apparent that the skills postgraduates deem valuable is dependent on whether they intend on remaining in academia or not. It was suggested that there are limited opportunities for postgraduates to develop practical academic skills such as teaching and marking. As such skills are taken into consideration when applying for PhDs or lectureships, students expressed concern that they could be disadvantaged by the limited opportunities. Additionally, it was highlighted that while at York many postgraduates are involved in various extra-curricula activities (volunteering, tutoring, etc) which often leads to gaining new skills and responsibilities. While it was acknowledged that prospective employers view such activities favourably, it was deemed that it would be of particular benefit to students if there was a means by which these skills could be accredited in some manner.



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Representatives from Careers Services explained that they offer a York Award for research postgraduates, which both accredits and demonstrates the transferable skills that an individual gains during their postgraduate study. However, this scheme is not available to taught postgraduates but Careers Services are currently researching the possibility of introducing such a scheme for taught postgraduates. Attention was brought to the various skills training offered by the Academic Support Office. Many of these courses are awarded self-standing certificates that are accepted by employers and therefore could be of interest to students wanting to enhance their Curriculum Vitae. Attendees were also informed that Careers Services are also looking into ways of increasing opportunities for postgraduates to gain practical academic skills. However, it was stressed that academic departments would need to take the lead on introducing such learning outcomes into their curriculum.

The University has recently agreed upon a postgraduate employability strategy which should take into account both specific and transferable skills that prospective employers will seek. The GSA has been working with Careers Services and the University regarding this strategy and shall keep postgraduates up to date as further developments occur. Opportunities offered by the Careers Services, Academic Support Office and other university departments are regularly posted on the GSA website, [www.yorkgsa.org](http://www.yorkgsa.org).

### **Customer Services**

It was interesting to note that a number of points mentioned at the forum came from the perspective of the student as a customer. Therefore, some of issues raised were in relation to students' experiences of customer service from the University. It was explained that students' expectations as a 'customer' are directly influenced by the cost of their tuition fees. Given the large amount of money that postgraduates spend on their studies especially overseas students, then it is by no surprise that students expect high standards which often they do not feel are met by the services they receive. Examples that were offered of the University not meeting such standards were: hidden costs, being provided with wrong or contradictory information, facilities maintenance and the perception of decisions being made at a management level with people below this having little or no power to make any changes.

A number of facilitators reported back that they found it of particular interest to get an insight of the 'customer' aspect of the postgraduate experience. Dr David Duncan explained that customer services is always a priority and that it is important to raise issues like those brought to the forum to ensure that structures can be put in place to stop the problems from reoccurring and provide suitable solutions for students where they feel mistreated. 'Hidden charges' is something that the University has been looking into, with specific focus on college and club sports fees and plan to remove these costs if it is feasible to do so. From the discussions it was apparent that channels of communication are often a problem, especially in regards to reporting processes. It is hoped that this can be remedied through implementing more clear lines of responsibility and ensuring that students are updated throughout the process. As promised a number of customer service related issues that were raised have been looked into by members of staff who attended the forum and students have reported that suitable solutions have been provided.

### **Campus Facilities**

In regards to campus facilities, there was a general sense of positivity regarding the new campus at Heslington East. However, students did point out that as would be expected, there is an obvious discrepancy between the facilities and services offered between the campuses and that it was essential that Heslington West was not neglected. This point was reiterated by the staff present, who stated that this point has already been considered and that some improvements to Heslington West have already started. Furthermore, it was communicated to attendees that a five year plan to improve rooms on Heslington West would be starting from this summer and that further improvements to the campus were part of the University's future strategy. The lack of awareness regarding the work already



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undertaken and that which is planned highlights a further issue of communication. Campus Services are currently looking into how they can improve communication and publicise work both already completed and that planned for the near future.

One student asked about the possibility of shorter term plans for improving the Heslington West campus regarding baby changing facilities. The student explained that they had already researched into the possibility of retro-fit units, which could be reinstalled as buildings were refurbished. Sue Johnston, Head of Campus Services asked the student to forward these details to her so that she could look into the possibilities of installing baby changing facilities in buildings on Heslington West. This is currently an ongoing process and suitable locations are now being identified.

The issue of car parking on campus was also discussed. It was put forward that due to the lack of parking facilities on campus, people park in the residential area of Badgerhill which is causing problems for residents. While the University is aware of this, this the City Council have resisted any plans for further parking facilities on the Heslington West campus and so the University is currently looking into interesting and imaginative ways to encourage staff and students to use public transport, cycle or walk to the campuses. In responses to this it was considered that the small number of showering facilities is often an obstacle for those wanting to cycle and therefore increasing such facilities might be part of the solution. While there was agreement on this, it was stressed that this would only count as part of a solution.

A number of specific issues in relation to campus facilities such as faulty taps, sensor lights, health and hygiene and concerns about wildlife were also raised. While such points are appropriate to raise at the forum as members of staff who can provide quick solutions are in attendance, using the forum for this purpose also highlights a lack of knowledge of who to report such things to. The forum is useful in providing such answers as attendees were told that for many of these issues a porter would be the first point of call and they would be able to follow the correct procedures to ensure a quick and effective solution. However, the forum does not prove useful for issuing such knowledge for those who do not attend. Thus the GSA will work with Campus Services to help ensure that students are better informed about particular things such as reporting processes and any building work currently in process. For those things that were reported at the last forum, the head of Campus Services has already found solutions or has started the process by which to solve the issues.

## ***Accommodation***

Accommodation has been a long discussed topic at all the forums and the internationalization of accommodation blocks is now a reoccurring theme. While, those who allocate rooms are aware of students wanting to have a multicultural experience of studying in England, providing such an opportunity is often difficult given the diversity of students applying for university accommodation. The University hopes that this can be overcome with their plan of increasing postgraduate accommodation in 2012 with the provision of a new college on the Heslington East campus. It is anticipated that the increase in accommodation will encourage and enhance the integration of postgraduates both overseas and home.

However, there were questions about whether the new college should solely be a postgraduate college or whether the University should work harder at integrating undergraduates and postgraduates. Thus increase the amount of postgraduates in each college. Discussions regarding this showed that there were pros and cons for both sides of the argument. The general agreement was despite which option is taken the University, Colleges, YUSU and GSA would need to work hard together to support development and enhancement of the postgraduate community. David Duncan expressed that the University would be very interested in hearing postgraduates view on whether it is better



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to have independent postgraduate colleges or mixed colleges. The GSA will try to gather such opinions and feed these back to the University.

## Academic

While much of the discussion was orientated around customer services and facilities, there were still a number of issues discussed that related to the academic side of the postgraduate experience. These issues still appear to have facilities and resources as the focus. It was implied that there is insufficient space for postgraduates who teach and tutors to meet with their students in a confidential space. While it was agreed that research postgraduates should be provided a space to study, each postgraduate cannot be guaranteed a space to themselves. However, the move of some departments to Heslington East will result in more rooms becoming available and it was put forward that there will be great consideration as to whether the newly available rooms can be allocated to postgraduates for studying/tutoring purposes.

It was proposed that Evision may not be appropriate for the tasks it has been set, with students saying that the records are often outdated as changes that occur are not readily updated. It was explained that due to the paper trail needed to inform changes on Evision it can take some time for the system to be updated. However, through the live feed there will be now more opportunity to make updates as the changes occur. Furthermore it was put forward that students are not aware of all the parts and functions of Evision. Thus, the University needs to investigate the different ways of promoting to students, how they can make the most of Evision's potential.

For the academic year 2010/11 a number of departments introduced transition sites where their new students could access pre-arrival information. The hope is that more departments will use these for the next academic year. Those in attendance were asked for any feedback related to their experience of such sites or what they would like to see available on such a resource. Due to the limited feedback that could be given by the small number of attendees, it was agreed that the GSA would work with the Academic Support Office on this project in terms of gathering feedback from the postgraduate community.

## Future Plans

From the discussions that took place at the Postgraduate Forum, the GSA has identified a number of elements that they can work on to help improve the postgraduate experience. Some aspects of this work can take immediate effect such as researching postgraduate opinion on different aspects of work taking place within the University and working with university departments to ensure that postgraduates are better informed about opportunities available. However, other elements such as the postgraduate employability strategy will form part of the GSAs long term work.

While we hope to increase the turnout for our next forum, feedback from both the facilitators and postgraduates that attended this forum expressed that they found the discussions fruitful and believe that there is still a need to continue with these forums. There was a general consensus that using an open and informal round the table discussion was more appropriate for the purpose of the forum than previous formats used. With this in mind, the GSA will consider using this format for the next forum too. However, it has been further suggested that there should maybe be two separate tables one for academic concerns and another for issues related to facilities and services. As a consequence it may be necessary to use a different venue, which could support such a set up.



## Conclusions

Our Postgraduate Forums have guided our activities through the past academic year and are continuing to shape our work in this current academic year. The feedback provided has 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.

The feedback that postgraduates brought to this forum expressed both new and reoccurring themes, which is essential for shaping the GSA and the University's understanding of what is important to postgraduates. Furthermore, it gives a level of insight into what extent solutions can be provided in an immediate context and what has to become part of a longer-term plan. For students it provides an opportunity for them to not only voice their opinion but also be part of the solutions for the things they want changed.

We are grateful to all members the University and the Graduate Students' Association, including those postgraduates in attendance 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 again, in the future.



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## Representation

Putting postgraduate issues firmly on the University's agenda



## Academic

Helping postgraduate students get the most from their studies



## Welfare

Offering confidential non judgemental assistance, advice and support



## Events

Organising a range of social activities, entertainment and trips



## Sports

Providing both friendly and competitive sports opportunities - for free



## Community

Enhancing the York experience through college common rooms, off-campus groups and volunteering

