



YORK'S THIRD POSTGRADUATE FORUM

November 2010

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. In March 2010, we held the university's first Postgraduate Forum in collaboration with the Deputy Vice-Chancellor. This successful event has guided our activities 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. The Action Plan that was generated and included in the review of the event has been well received by a number of University bodies, including Operations Group, University Teaching Committee, and Student Services Committee.

This report reviews our third Postgraduate Forum, held in collaboration with the Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research, on the 24th November 2010. This gave us the opportunity to develop these plans further, while showing what progress we have made on the issues identified by our membership throughout the year.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads 'John Calhoun'.

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 review of the March Action plan which is available to read on our website 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.

After reflecting on the organisation of the first few forums and the feedback we gathered from attendees, we took the opportunity to make changes to the format and delivery of the forum in November and we continue to take on board suggestions in regard to this. While, there has been a reported need for a more formal structure where those present visit each table, in practice it appears that attendees prefer to attend discussions on a topic that is of a particular interest to them rather than go to each discussion. During the next forum we shall monitor this in order to devise the most appropriate format. Facilitators shall continue to record the key aspects of the discussions to allow us to analyse the feedback allowing the forums to continue to contribute to and shape future work.

Promotion

The event was promoted to all postgraduates through the following mechanisms

- Email to departments from Pro Vice-Chancellor John Local
- Email to Postgraduate Academic Representatives from the GSA RAW Coordinator
- Email to all postgraduate college members from each college administrator
- 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
- Posters throughout campus



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The GSA contacted the Campus Media outlets and had discussed the York Postgraduate Forum with several of these outlets. Despite these discussions nothing has been yet materialised in regards to publicity or coverage of the forums. This will be readdressed for the events held in 2011.

Turnout

The diversity of the postgraduate community was reflected by those who attended the event, as there were both research and taught postgraduates, international students, part-time students and student parents. The attendance was of a reasonable size that comfortably allowed for seven separate discussion groups.

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

Forum Schedule

Attendees were greeted by GSA representatives on arrival and handed a folder containing forum information and relevant documentation from the Association, including a review of the work undertaken on the action plan to date. Prior to the informal feedback session, an introductory message was given by GSA President John Calhoun on behalf of the GSA and Pro Vice-Chancellor, Research John Local on behalf of the University. The motivation behind both talks was to stress the importance of the postgraduate contribution to the University both in terms of academic output and the changes that materialise as a result of postgraduate representation.

A two hour long informal feedback session was then held, with attendees divided into seven groups of nine or ten attendees, with discussion facilitated by a member of the GSA committee and a member of staff from a university body. The focus of these groups was:

- (i) 'The University' – facilitated by Professor John Local (Pro Vice-Chancellor, Research) and John Calhoun (GSA President)
- (ii) 'Student Support' – facilitated by Steve Page (Manager of Student Support Services) and David Mariano (GSA Welfare Officer)
- (iii) 'Colleges' – facilitated by Derek Lavin (Dean of Wentworth)
- (iv) 'Campuses' – facilitated by Sue Johnston (Head of Campus Services), Jon Greenwood (Director of Commercial Services) and Adam Leadbeater (GSA Finance Officer)
- (v) 'Study Facilities' – facilitated by Chris Ellwood (Head of Academic Liaison, Library) and Susanne Hodges (IT Training Manager)
- (vi) 'Skills Development & Careers' – facilitated by Karen Clegg (Director of Researcher Development), Heather Stout (Careers) and Isha Arora (GSA Academic Affairs Officer)
- (vii) Graduate Students' Association – facilitated by Lotta Raty (GSA Chair of Association Council) and Kay Mitchell (GSA Representation, Advice & Welfare Coordinator)



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Following this, both postgraduate students and members of university staff had the opportunity to put any other questions to a panel consisting of Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research John Local, GSA President John Calhoun and GSA Welfare Officer Dave Mariano.

At the end of the session, we collected feedback from participants to enable us to evaluate the forum and build this into future events.

Summary of Discussions

(i) *The University*

**Facilitators: Pro Vice-Chancellor Professor John Local
& GSA President John Calhoun**

Although their academic programme is the primary reason for being at York, many postgraduates believed that they had not received adequate information regarding their studies before arriving at the University. Reflecting back students suggested that receiving further information regarding courses and timetables in advance would have put them in a better position for choosing the most appropriate modules, especially where students' programmes are split between different departments. Furthermore, it was put forward that talks and presentations by the department on courses that they will be offering the following term would be beneficial in preparing students for choosing their next modules.

Attendees explained that this issue is a result of how information is presented on both departmental and other university websites which is perceived to be unnecessarily complicated and often reflects a lack of communication between departments and other areas of the University. Therefore, one way of resolving such issues could be to have a central system for distributing all pre-arrival information, with a clear indication to all new students by what means they will receive such information.

(ii) *Student Support*

**Facilitators: Manager of Student Support Services Steve Page
& GSA Welfare Officer David Mariano**

Accommodation was the topic most discussed at the "Student Support" table, where a number of issues were raised. These were mostly concerned with the process of applying for accommodation. Many students explained that they were unaware of deadlines that applied to the application process or that such deadlines proved problematic when students first need confirmation of meeting all the terms of their conditional offer before they can apply for accommodation. The former is inextricably linked to the level and clarity of information available to students and the channels by which it is communicated to them. It became apparent that many students rarely checked eVision or their university email prior to commencing their studies. Furthermore, many international students perceived that there was need to have information available for families to access.

During the forum it was suggested that there is a need to increase students' awareness that the university communicates almost exclusively through email. Therefore, while it was acknowledged that students have sole responsibility for checking their emails, awareness of the importance of checking emails prior to the start of term



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needs to be stressed. Perhaps providing information on how to set up message forwarding from their university emails to their personal emails may ensure that vital information is not missed. Often issues are a result of expectations and the extent to which these are met, therefore it is important to clarify with whom particular responsibilities lie and what can be expected.

Postgraduates expressed that they are unaware of what financial support is available and have expressed a need for more readily available information. The GSA is currently in the initial stages of re-structuring their funding allocation criteria and coordination with additional university support offices/schemes would be advantageous if not outright necessary.

(iii) Colleges

Facilitators: Wentworth Dean Derek Lavin

The report from this group is still pending at time of writing.

(iv) The Campuses

**Facilitators: Head of Campus Services Sue Johnston,
Director of Commercial Services Jon Greenwood
& GSA Finance Officer Adam Leadbeater**

Campus facilities in relation to postgraduates' perception of the extent to which these services meet their needs, were brought to the attention of those facilitating discussions regarding 'the campuses'. It was expressed that there was a discrepancy between the services offered to postgraduates and undergraduates, with limited services being provided outside term time. This was not only in regards to commercial services but also in relation to maintenance services within accommodation. This is a topic that has been previously discussed at postgraduate forums. Thus the GSA and university are aware of this issue and are currently dedicated to raising the issue when given appropriate opportunities to ensure that a sufficient solution is provided.

The issue of accommodation was also raised here, in regards to demographics and the different contracts available for letting university accommodation. Attendees expressed a need for reflecting greater cultural diversity within the accommodation blocks. The University attracts many overseas students and many have explained that part of their expectations of moving to a different country to study is to experience different cultures. However, due to the University's policy on guaranteeing accommodation for non-EU overseas students, it is often the case that students do not often get such an opportunity to socialise with a vast range of postgraduates from different cultures and even less of an opportunity to socialise with home-students. Again, this is not the first time this issue has been raised and so far a suitable solution has not been found. Possible solutions suggested that came from the forum were:

- Distributing a questionnaire to postgraduates who currently rent university accommodation to gauge what proportion of cultural diversity would be deemed appropriate for meeting their expectations.



- Liaising with College deans (who are responsible for assigning rooms) to look at the social structure of accommodation to see if this could provide a suitable solution. However, the extent to which social structuring would be appropriated was debated.
- Setting up a system similar to those used for allocating concert tickets, where a student is able to choose the room they would like.

Students in attendance also highlighted the need for University service providers to work with students to provide solutions to problems. Breakdown in communication was identified as the main contributor to issues, as it was suggested that problems often occur when students feel that they are not adequately informed about changes or the process being taken to deal with their queries. However, by improving communication between service providers, students and other appropriate staff this would ensure that everybody would be in receipt of the same information and expectations from all sides can be monitored and catered for.

(v) Study Facilities

Facilitators: Head of Library Academic Liaison Chris Ellwood & IT Training Manager Susanne Hodges

Students attending the forum expressed concern about study space, highlighting a need among research students for a space that they can use for studying on a longer term basis and leave their belongings if necessary. Students referred to departments that already have access to such facilities and believed that the 'Nests' and 'Perches' system used to manage spaces in the Berrick Saul met their needs. More individual study rooms are currently being created in the refurbished JB Morrell Library and the Harry Fairhurst building. Chris Ellwood explained that during planning for use of these new rooms she would highlight the views expressed at the forum.

The quantity and accessibility of photocopiers and printers across the university proved problematic for students. The facilitators explained to those in attendance that the issue is currently under review and that their concerns would be fed into the review. There were also, some subject specific issues raised, to which the students have been signposted to their Academic Liaison Librarian.

Students also raised a concern about the large demand on the IT Support Office from students at the beginning of term. This resulted in students having to wait in long queues before their queries could be dealt with. Often this meant that students did not get the assistance they required due to time commitments related to their induction programmes. Sue Hodges has agreed to make sure that IT Support Office are aware of this issue so that they can take it into consideration for the next cohort of students.

(vi) Skill Development & Careers

Facilitators: Director of Researcher Development Karen Clegg, Heather Stout from Careers & GSA Academic Affairs Officer Isha Arora

Part-time students articulated that while departments are mindful of their restricted time, as a consequence this leads to a lack of inclusion in departmental activities that they would like to be involved in. This could be resolved by departments and the GSA taking extra consideration to ensure that all communications regarding activities for postgraduates is sent to both full-time and part-time postgraduates.



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Students perceive a need for particular information to given prior to attending York. However, most information identified is available online, but due to the complexity of the structures and formats used for displaying the information students are often unable to access it. An example of this would PhD students who felt further information is needed regarding research courses and applications. This would indicate that there is need for in-depth IT training to tackle the issue.

Those in attendance expressed concern about the availability of places at careers events and appointments with careers advisors. It was explained that careers services are looking into increasing the number of advisors they employ and highlighted that it is possible to submit questions to advisors electronically via the website. In regards to the events, students were told to just turn up in case someone who booked a place does not show up. These queries indicate that postgraduates are actively seeking advice on employability and future opportunities and that this is an area that they need greater support on. The GSA are now advertising careers events through their weekly newsletter and on the website, but are trying to support students further by working with the careers service on a postgraduate employability strategy.

Language support both within departments and the University was also discussed. Such discussions brought light on to two main suggestions. For students where English was not their first language, it was believed that they would greatly benefit from having access to past course content prior to application. This would provide awareness of the standard at which students are expected to understand and analyse, helping them better prepare for their studies. It was also acknowledged that the University does offer a variety of language support to students however postgraduates are often not aware of what is available. Therefore, there is a need for the GSA to work with those providing these services to ensure that the programmes are well publicised to postgraduates so that they can benefit from these initiatives. Such collaboration will also allow student feedback students in regards to where they perceive gaps in the services and what can be done to help improve these to be efficiently communicated.

(vii) Graduate Students' Association

**Facilitators: GSA Chair of Association Council Lotta Raty &
GSA Representation, Advice and Welfare Coordinator Kay Mitchell**

Postgraduates appeared to be in agreement that if they were unable to attend the welcome week or elements of it, then they missed out on an opportunity to gather knowledge on particular things that they could not get elsewhere. This was echoed by students who do not start their studies in October and feel they completely miss and are not aware of anything. In addition, students from overseas explained that at first the education system here can appear to be very complex. While, there are workshops and presentations to explain about the different services available, these often reach full capacity quickly. Thus, many students miss out on what they deem to be vital introductions, which help students to get to know and settle in their new environment and know what is available to aid their studying.

It was therefore suggested that it would be valuable to incoming students to have all this information in an easily accessible format, in a single place that they can refer to. The GSA will soon have a new website and it is the organisations' hope that this or their VLE can be used to display such information during welcome week and the months leading up to it. It was also suggested that having postgraduates who have already gone through the experience available for new students to ask questions would be valuable.



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Question & Answer Session

All attendees were given the opportunity to raise any remaining issues to a panel during a half hour question and answer session. The panel consisted of Pro Vice-Chancellor for Research John Local, GSA President John Calhoun and GSA Welfare Officer Dave Mariano. The following points were addressed:

- Student safety: regarding the Stray
- Communication and how to make it more available
- Integrating a more international flavour within the University

Future Plans

Following the growing success of these forums, we will continue to organise one event per teaching term, while hoping to maintain the link with a member of University Senior Management Group. Dr David Duncan, Registrar and Secretary, has agreed to undertake this role at the next forum on 2nd March 2011.

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

- There has been a reported need for a more formal structure where those present visit each table. We tried to introduce this structure at the last forum but attendees preferred to attend discussions on their particular interest rather than go to each discussion. We shall continue to monitor this in order to devise the most appropriate format.
- The forum has been perceived by service providers within the University as a good platform by which they can inform students of current changes, initiatives and opportunities. Thus, it has been suggested that the structure of the forum needs to cater for allowing all attendees to hear these messages. This would either have to be by making students attend each discussion table, or providing an opportunity for people to announce any changes and the likes to all at the forum.
- While publicity was greatly increased for the last forum, it has been put forward that more detailed information about the forum would be gratefully received.

Conclusions

Our Postgraduate Forums have guided our activities through the past academic year and 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. This forum has provided the new cohort of postgraduates the opportunity to feedback and understand the GSA's dedication to representing postgraduates at all levels of the university.

While we have worked hard to take on board the feedback given at previous forums, we are still very aware that some aspects of this feedback will influence the foundations of some of the GSA's long term strategies meaning that the desired changes will not happen instantaneously and that postgraduates may keep raising these issues as they progress may not be visible and thus it may be perceived that we are not aware of the given issues. However, the GSA Action Plan, which details the issues we are addressing and how is available to all postgraduates and can be accessed through our website.



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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 March, in collaboration with Dr David Duncan, and throughout the next academic year.



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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

