



**Annual Report** 2011 / 2012



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# Forward

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It has been an extremely busy year for the GSA, with many successes to be proud of. Work in the last few years has focused on ensuring the important organisational foundations are in place and that the GSA is visible to its members. This work has provided the platform for the GSA to improve its services and deliver an invaluable contribution to our postgraduate members and the wider community.

The report clearly evidences the excellent job that the GSA continues to do in balancing the need to: represent the postgraduate voice across the institution; provide reactive support and guidance services when students ask for it, and to deliver the community building work which can be seen through the popular events and sporting provision that is offered.

Beyond these key aspects of GSA life, it is the team's drive to innovate, think differently, and continually introduce new and relevant ideas which are the hallmark of the last year. There are many new ideas visible within the report that demonstrates the major steps that the GSA has made in recent years. From the focus on employability and internships; the outward looking work with partners within the UK and further afield; and the creation of the Postgraduate Community Fund, there is a clear sense of purpose evident within the report.

Underpinning all of this work, I am delighted as Chair of the Trustees that the GSA has a stable platform to continue to build from, both in terms of human and financial resource.

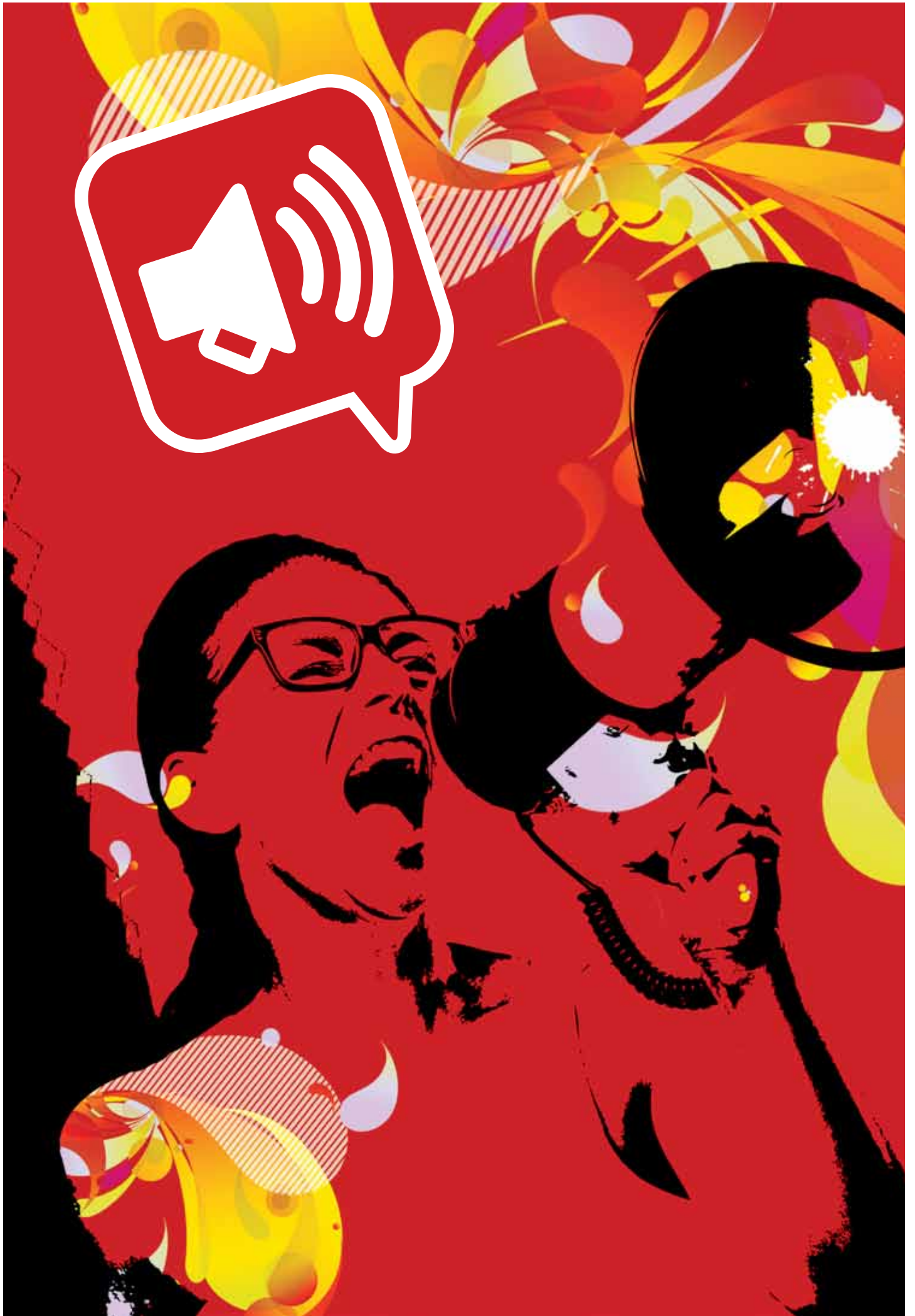
**Ian Pain**

Chair of Trustees



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# Representation

## Putting postgraduate issues firmly on the University's agenda

**Representation is at the heart of the GSA. The needs of postgraduate research students and postgraduate taught students were well served over the past year by the GSA, and through collaboration with the University of York Students' Union (YUSU). This took many forms, and whilst attendance at committees remains the most important facet of representation; forums, focus group meetings and individual meetings between Officers and appropriate areas of the community continued to happen on a regular basis.**

### QAA review of the University of York

The Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) undertook its six year review of the University of York, for which there was significant scope for student input into the process through a written submission to the reviewing panel, student meetings and through a student liaison officer (LSR) for the panel. Due to the student representation structures in place it was decided that it would be appropriate to submit a joint submission with YUSU, and to have a separate LSR, provided by the GSA. While this was somewhat unconventional, the system worked well and the two sets of officers worked together to produce a comprehensive, fair, and fully evidenced submission. The GSA President acted as the LSR, and worked with the YUSU Academic Officer to aid the review – in which the University achieved the highest available award from the QAA.

In terms of representing the student body, the report from the QAA review will go some way to directing University of York strategy in the coming years and it was important to ensure that the postgraduate voice was heard. It is also expected that other institutions use the QAA report to help design their institutional strategy, which, due to the GSA's presence and impact, could help postgraduates across the sector.

### Employability

Postgraduate employability remains an area of concern to the Association, and this is an area which the GSA has been extremely active on; involving both the Careers Centre and the Alumni Office. The Association played a large part in the Professional Connect event, and is keen to see this type of event continue and flourish. To this end, a small amount of financial resource has been pledged by the Association for the production of postgraduate focused resources to support similar future events. This collaboration has helped produce a number of other events across the year and more are planned during 2012/13.

One area that the GSA has continued to work on is to increase the number of internships available for postgraduates. While a campaign will start during Welcome Week 2012, there were considerable strides made across 2011/12 in addressing the issues of the current provision and finding creative solutions for them. The GSA has made available a significant financial subsidy scheme for companies to apply to, via the Student Internship Bureau, should they wish to hire a postgraduate intern.

## Local, national and international partnerships

The GSA has spent considerable effort over the last year seeking, developing and cementing links across the sector. This has taken several forms, such as other equivalent unions in the UK, national bodies, as well as a link with the University of North Carolina's GSA.

UK student unions are starting to take an interest in the work of the GSA, and we have worked with representatives from Sheffield, Hull and the University of East Anglia to look at areas to share practice, ideas and experiences. The York GSA is still one of the few independent GSAs in the country.

Our member' are members of YUSU, and therefore, the National Union of Students (NUS). The GSA is not a member of the NUS in its own right. However, the GSA has been working hard with the NUS in an effort to allow student officers to access resources and training and the GSA was invited to present at the NUS National Postgraduate Conference. This presentation was given by the President and General Manager.

In February the GSA General Manager joined the University of York Study Group tour to the USA, visiting six Universities. The GSA has since worked with one of those universities, the University of North Carolina (UNC), to form a partnership with the UNC Graduate and Professional Students Federation (GPSF). There is much to learn for both partners, and we were joined by the UNC GPSF in June 2012 for the training of the new GSA Principal Officer Team. We hope to be able to send the GSA President to UNC in 2013 to help train their equivalent officers.

## Elections for Principal Officers

Elections remain at the heart of the GSA's democratic structure. It therefore remains a priority for the association to maximise this means of engagement. Following discussion with the GSA Board of Trustees, a full review of the election procedure will take place in the winter of 2012/13.

The GSA have trialled several alterations to its Election Regulations (for the 2011/12 and 2012/13 Principal Officer elections), designed to engage two types of postgraduate students who historically hadn't interacted with the organisation: students who had studied for an undergraduate degree at York; and PhD candidates in their 'writing up year'. The changes in the regulations essentially increased the candidate eligibility criteria to include any new postgraduate student with a confirmed place at York, or any final year PhD student.

Other small changes were made to the election regulations; allowing for students to campaign during elections as part of a team (but being elected individually) and standardising campaign material allowances. These changes were designed to both open up elections to potential new candidates and ensure that the process was fair to everyone.

To accommodate these changes, it required a change to the commencement date for new officers – ensuring that the Principal Officers were actually members when they took up their roles. It has also increased the administration around elections, with extra checks in place regarding eligibility and has also required the GSA to come up with a solution for students who had been elected into positions but subsequently chose not to study in York. This has proved a challenge.

Although there are have been teething troubles with the 2011/12 trial such as; the Welfare Officer elect, who had a confirmed place to study at York subsequently deciding to study at a different institution and challenges regarding the length of 'writing up' year(s); the trial has largely been successful. This can clearly be shown by looking at the candidates, where each position was



contested by a minimum of two candidates, one a continuing postgraduate and the other with a confirmed place to study for a postgraduate degree. Although this trial will continue, alterations may be made to further improve the number of candidates standing and the overall student awareness of the elections process.

The Principal Officer team for 2011/12, consisted of a mixture of Masters and PhD level students, and continued to represent the demographics of the membership – with EU and international students heavily involved. Due to the case outlined above, the team started the term minus a Welfare Officer, who was elected in December along with twenty one volunteer officers. The team changed further with the resignation, due to academic pressures, of the Finance Officer in March. It was decided to continue with four Officers due to the proximity of the Principal Officer elections.

## **GSA Council**

Council has, in 2011/12, played a valuable part of the Associations' activities, both holding the principal officers to account and providing guidance for their activities. As stated in the 2010/11 Annual Report, the GSA Council has been subject to much focus in 2011/12 with various methods attempted to ensure that the Council, and its members remain relevant and engaged in the work of the association. This work will continue into 2012/13, with plans in place for enhanced training for Council members and better use of the skills that Council members offer.

## **GSA Trustee Board**

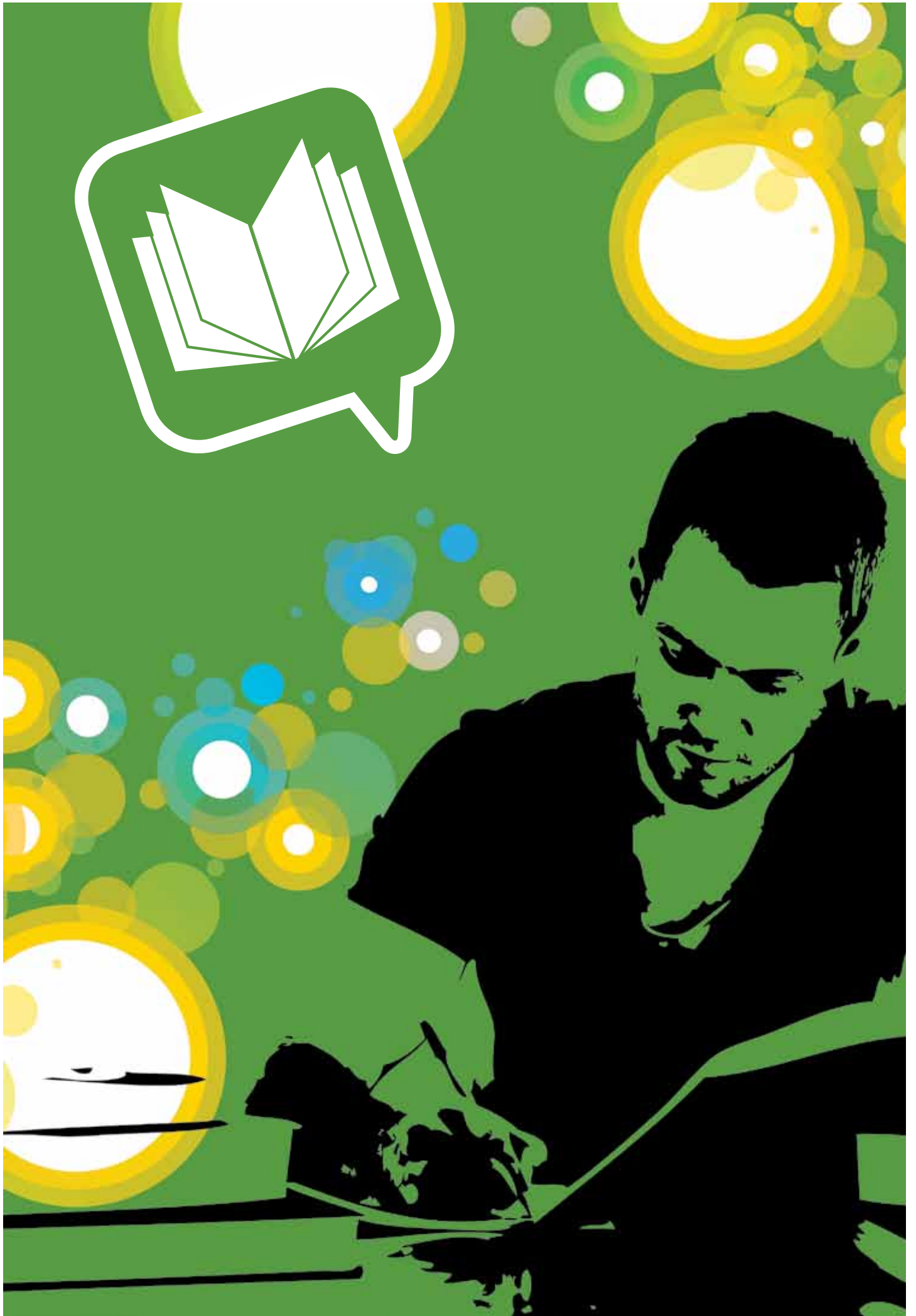
The GSA Trustee Board is a valuable part of the GSA's structures and this has been especially the case in 2011/12 where the quarterly meetings have provided thought-provoking discussion, valuable insights and a clear sense of direction. The Trustee Board has also grown with the addition of a new external member and an additional student (non-GSA officer) member in line with constitutional expectations.

## **Policy support**

The GSA has continued to strengthen the level of support given to GSA officers and this was enhanced by a new full time staff member – Ken Leach – who replaced the part time Policy and Administration Assistant, Loveday Smith, when she left the sector to take up a role as a teacher. While Ken's remit is significantly larger than Loveday's and includes communications, it has allowed the GSA to introduce a much more comprehensive pre-meeting briefing and post-meeting debriefing model. This is an area of growth for the GSA, and the addition of Ken is expected to have a lasting positive impact on the effectiveness of the Officers.

## **Conclusions**

Overall, 2011/12 has been a successful year for the GSA. The University has been responsive to the issues brought before it by the Officers and we are confident that this will continue. There has also been a pleasing willingness, by various parts of the institution – especially the Academic Support Office (ASO), Research and Development Team (RDT), The International Relations Office, Careers Centre and Development and Alumni Relations Office (DARO) – to work together on issues and finding joint solutions to common problems, such as the issue of postgraduate fees. While these areas of work represent a significant step forward, there remains considerable work to do further improve the postgraduate student experience.



# Academic

## Helping postgraduate students get the most from their studies

**The GSA works hard to support postgraduates achieve their aim of gaining a postgraduate degree. Consequently many of the services and opportunities the GSA offers postgraduates are intended to support postgraduates succeed in their studies. This year the Academic Officer, along with the other principle officers have worked hard to continue to provide postgraduates with opportunities to gain academic skills training. The GSA also provide advice, support and representation and ensure that the needs and interests of postgraduates were considered when policies, changes and initiatives were being considered by the University.**

### Research students

The GSA has continued to work closely with the Researcher Development Team (RDT) to ensure that the specific needs of research students are catered for. This has involved frequent consultation between the two services with student feedback from Postgraduate Forums, Annual Programme Reviews and student representatives being used to lead discussions and contribute to the development of provision.

Departmental Postgraduates Who Teach (PGWTs) representatives have highlighted that this is an area which the GSA needs to focus on. Discussions between the Principal Officers concluded that research in this area must be undertaken next year.

### Advice and support

This year has seen a hundred percent increase in the amount of students that the organisation has provided support and advice to in regards to successfully completing their studies, including attending academic hearings and providing support with student appeals. This increase, in part, can be attributed to the increased awareness of the organisation by both University staff and postgraduates as a result of the organisation's new branding and improved publicity.

However, changes to university regulations and a general increase in student cases seen across the sector are also contributors to the increase in advice and support sought by students.

In regards to the changes to university regulations, the GSA President and Academic Affairs Officer raised their concerns with the Standing Committee on Assessment which resulted in another immediate change in the regulations in favour of students.

In response to the increase in case work, the organisation has identified the need for a welfare portal. This tool will be used by students to book appointments with the Representation, Advice and Welfare Coordinator, as well as provide a resource by which the student and Representation, Advice and Welfare Coordinator can update each other in relation to that student's case.

## Quality Assurance

This year the university had its QAA Review and the Principal Officers were involved with the writing of the Student Written Submission and student consultations – with the President taking a lead on both.

As always, the GSA has played an active role in discussions and implementation of university policy, departmental periodic reviews, the annual programme review process and, for this year, the Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES). This year, the University Teaching Committee agreed that the GSA, in partnership with the Departmental Postgraduate Academic Representatives will be responsible for providing departments with postgraduate feedback that will be included in their Annual Programme Review reports.

This policy not only shows the GSA's crucial role in working with students and the University to ensure that postgraduates are provided with excellence in teaching and learning, but also highlights that the University acknowledges that this is an area in which the GSA can provide invaluable input.

In addition, the GSA has sent various members of staff, Principal Officers and Departmental Postgraduate Academic Representatives to workshops, conferences and training focusing on quality assurance and representation.

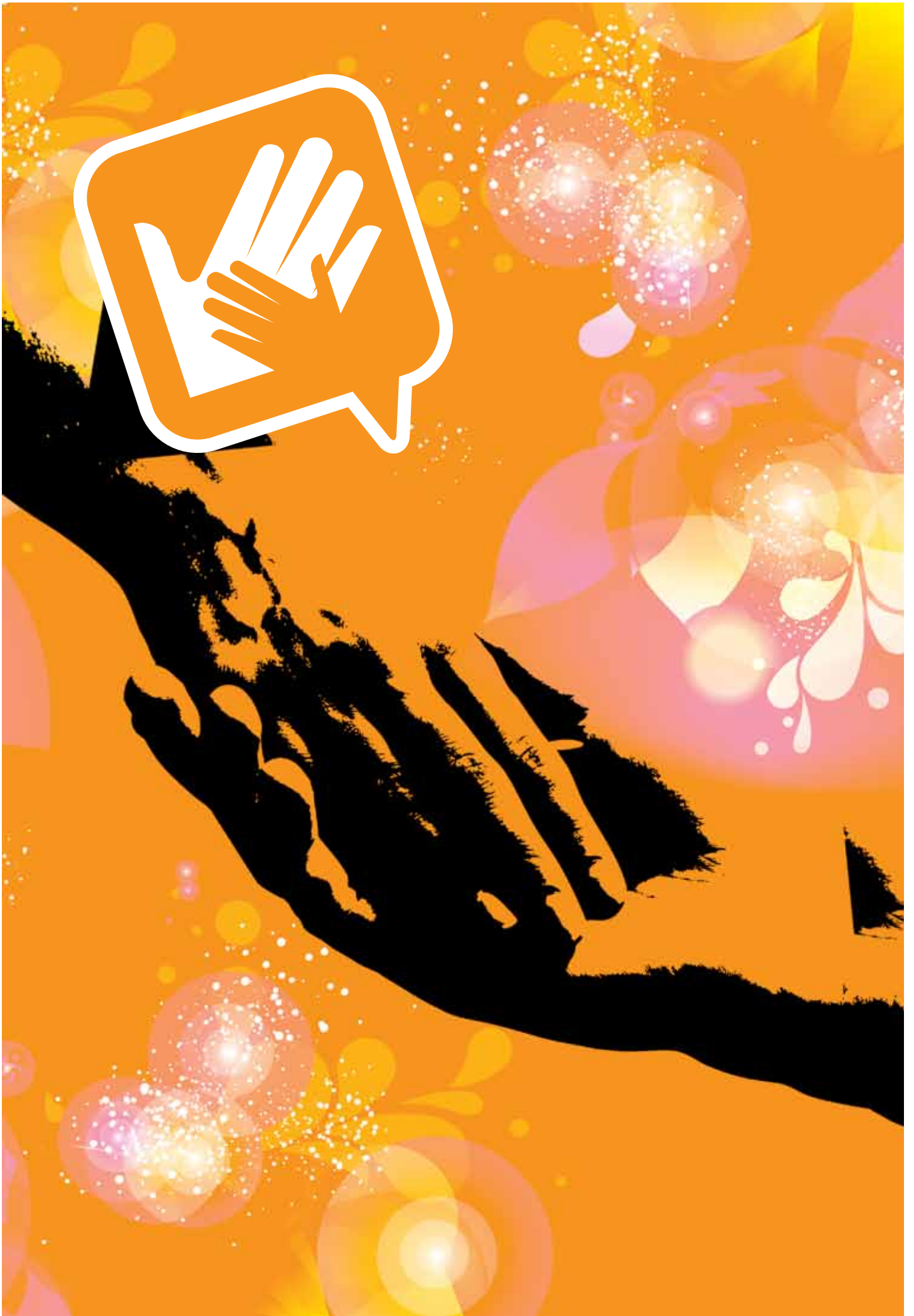
## Departmental Postgraduate Academic Representatives

As postgraduate feedback is central to the Principal Officers' ability to represent their membership accurately the GSA has over 130 departmental postgraduate academic representatives. These volunteers collect feedback from fellow students, which is presented to the department and the GSA. Training is provided to the representatives and they meet each term at the postgraduate forum. This year, feedback from representatives has led to the increase of skills training and the introduction of statistics workshops.

Engagement and participation from representatives is increasing each year and this will be an area that the GSA will continue to work on. This year, the GSA began to offer representatives opportunities to attend external training and conferences. Interest in and uptake of these opportunities was very positive.

## Conclusions

This year there has been an increase in awareness of the academic services the GSA provides postgraduates by both members of university staff and students. This has resulted in a huge increase of students accessing these services, from academic workshops, to student support. While this is very positive for the GSA and something the organisation hopes will continue, it is essential that we look at how we can effectively respond to increased needs and demands.



# Welfare

## Offering confidential, non-judgemental assistance, advice and support

**Welfare is still a significant element of the services offered by the organisation. Due to the restructuring of our welfare services in the previous year, 2011/12 has seen the GSA take a more proactive approach to welfare, with the focus being student well being, rather than the traditional approach to welfare which focuses on providing solutions once problems arise. Consequently, the Welfare Team this year has spent a lot of time collaborating with different support services within the university to enhance the information and literature that the GSA has regarding well being and building peer-to-peer networks.**

**While there have been some significant advances in these areas of service provision and some remarkable results, for a number of reasons, the overall delivery of welfare provision for 2011/12 was not what the organisation had initially envisaged. A significant contributing factor to this was due to a forced by-election – the Welfare Officer did not take up their role until January 2012.**

### Accommodation

The GSA has continued to work very closely with the Accommodation Office ensuring that postgraduates were given relevant information and are aware of any changes in a timely manner. This has resulted in an increase of the number of postgraduates living on campus including home and EU students. These advances are a result of the GSA working with the University in regards to the quantity and quality of postgraduate accommodation, while also addressing postgraduate feedback in relation to the internationalisation of accommodation. Additionally, the GSA and Accommodation Office have continued to deliver the Find a Housemate event to assist students who do not wish to stay on campus.

### Financial support

As a result of the structural review the previous year, 2011/12 has seen the financial support offered by the GSA shift to a purely information-based service. This has required the organisation to be aware of external support offered to students and work very closely with the Student Financial Support Unit. This is an area that organisation needs to continue to develop in the coming year, as the number of financial related queries are increasing.

### Peer-to-peer networks

GSA has continued their work in developing peer to peer networks for postgraduate students. This year has seen the York Student Family Network grow from strength to strength; facilitated by the enthusiasm and dedication of a core group of members of the network. This shows the importance of member engagement both in regards to ensuring that the network meets the needs and interests of the postgraduates involved but also in sustaining the network.

This year the York Student Family Network won a University of York Shepherd Group Award. The key to continuing this success is to ensure that despite the turnover of students, the GSA is able to retain those families previously involved while engaging new families. The GSA has also carried out research in regards to developing a PhD network with a social focus, which has been highlighted in student feedback as something students feel is currently missing in their experience at York.

## Equality and diversity

The GSA has continued its dedication to ensure that all postgraduates regardless of gender, nationality and ideology are awarded the same opportunities and positive experiences at the University of York. The diverse needs and interests of postgraduate students are represented at various committees at all levels within the University and are central to all policy and decisions made within the GSA.

## Conclusions

Welfare continues to be a central focus of the GSA. This year, the GSA has taken a different approach and like all new strategies there are things that work well and others that will take time to develop. Welfare provision will always be a service that the GSA will need to continually reevaluate in terms of approach, as the needs and interests of the membership change each year, as new students come to York. However, by taking a proactive stance, the organisation will be in a better place for providing dynamic welfare provision.





# Sports

## Providing both friendly and competitive sports opportunities – for free

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**For the third year running, the GSA's sports provision has remained constant in terms of number of sessions offered and attendance. The GSA considers the offer of free sport for every postgraduate in a non-competitive, supportive environment, to be an important means for breaking down social barriers and allowing postgraduate students to 'take a break' from the intensity of their academic work.**

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The Services Officer has been regularly contacted about the expansion of the sports offer to include new sports classes, such as Zumba and Spin, or to increase capacity at the sessions currently offered. While this is not currently possible for resource reasons, it will be considered with the opening of the new University Sport Village, in September 2012.

The lack of engagement from the Sports Officers during 2011/12 has proved an issue and the GSA Principal Officers must address this for 2012/13 to reduce the administrative burden on the Services Officer.

The GSA and Wentworth have continued to work together to define the relationship for the purposes of college sport, with mixed levels of success and there is still confusion regarding the delegation of roles and responsibility. This work will continue over the course of 2012/13.

Whilst the GSA's emphasis remains on non-competitive sport, there is still a lack of postgraduate involvement in university-level sport. Whilst the GSA is mindful of the time and academic pressures on the postgraduate community, more efforts must be made to include these students in University sports teams, and this must be a priority for the 2012/13 Services Officer. In addition, it is possible that there are a number of postgraduate students with appropriate coaching certificates.



# Events and Trips

## Organising a range of social activities, entertainment and trips

**Social activities are an important part of the GSA's offering for the graduate community at York and 2011/12 offered the chance to increase engagement in these activities by providing a range of different events and trips across the year.**

### Events

One of the key pledges for the Principal Officers in 2010/11 was to remove all participation charges from events, which, while proving a challenge for the Association, improved the experience for members. It has forced the Officers to slightly reduce the offering and move the marketing of events onto online, and therefore free, mediums.

While there are associated dangers with this, the level of participation in events has largely been high, and the 'big' events, such as the annual Halloween party have been at full capacity. There remains a challenge for the association to engage students living off campus and in Heslington East, as well as involving GSA Council members in the running and attending GSA events. The Principal Officers for 2012/13 must carefully consider how to tackle these issues.

As noted in our 2010/11 report, the decline in participation in formal events such as balls was noted, and in line with procedures, attendance monitored. As a result, it wasn't possible to cover the costs of formal events, and these activities have been dropped from the offering. This is partly due to high number of 'competing' formal events run by departments, colleges and YUSU.

The 'Continental Nights' held across the year have been one of the real successes for the GSA and something that have brought together students of many cultures and across different levels of academic study. These have mainly been held in cooperation with the International Students' Association – a society within YUSU.

### Trips

Trips remain one of the success stories of the GSA, and 2011/12 has proved no exception.

The GSA invested in some events management software to help improve the user experience. This has added functionality to the GSA, including having much more user data; being able to gather feedback on trips; and take online payments.

The Services Officer has also diversified the trip offering whilst responding to student requests. Therefore the trip offering included not only the standard trips: such as Oxford, Newcastle, Alton Towers; but a trip to a Premiership football match and a trip to 'The Deep' in Hull, which was requested by the York Student Family Network.

Financially, the GSA tries to keep trip costs to a minimum and takes advantage of offers and discounts where possible. The GSA has also looked at diversifying the range of tickets and options for trips to specific events, such as theme parks, where it occasionally works out more cost effective for students to purchase their entry tickets separately. The GSA remains confident that we can continue to offer good value for money trips and routinely benchmarks the cost of trips against commercial providers.



# Community

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

**During 2011/12 the GSA assessed the needs of the internal and external community and attempted to find solutions to longstanding issues.**

### Colleges

The GSA has focused on the collegiate structure of the university and the on-campus postgraduate accommodation. Issues which are especially important as postgraduate accommodation becomes further spread out across campus, covering six of the eight colleges – James and Vanbrugh being the exceptions. The Principal Officers have been working with the University Accommodation Office and colleges to help improve this situation, with a proposal of returning Wentworth to a ‘normal’ mixed undergraduate and postgraduate college being explored. The Association has also worked with colleges in order to form better support networks for residents and reach out to the non-resident members.

Once again, the Graduate Common Room structure has been difficult to manage, and largely unproductive. There could be many reasons behind this, not least the fact that the small numbers of residents makes it hard to form a community, and the competing needs of different types of students – Masters and PhD candidates.

### Departments

The GSA has been working with departments across the University to try to ensure that students have relevant support, especially outside of undergraduate term time. Whilst there are obvious benefits to the University in ensuring that this happens, it also exposed a weakness within the GSA’s own work, which the Principal Officers, working with the University Senior Management Group has sought to fill with the ‘Postgraduate Community Fund’.

### Postgraduate Community Fund

The Principal Officers will be launching the new Postgraduate Community Fund in August 2012. The fund will be open to all members of the University community who have ideas on how to improve the postgraduate experience. It is based on similar models operating in universities in the USA, where applications must meet certain criteria in order to gain funding, and will therefore seek to ensure that the key priorities of the officers are reflected in the criteria. This is the first of its kind in the UK, and the GSA is optimistic of its chances to enhance the postgraduate community. The Postgraduate Community Fund will be headed by the Finance and Community Officer – a trial position for 2012/13.

### Finance and Community Officer

In order to strengthen the ‘community’ aspect of the GSA’s work, we have agreed to trial the new position of Finance and Community Officer for 2012/13. The post holder will meet all the constitutional requirements of the Finance Officer, but will take a lead on all external activities, as well as working with the President on matters concerning the internal postgraduate community.

# General Manager's Report

**2011/12 has been a constructive year for the Graduate Students' Association. The switch to a charitable organisation has brought with it a number of extra areas of work and development which needed tidied up as well as the maintenance of outcomes of previous projects, such as marketing and e-marketing. These have proved both satisfying and successful.**

The emphasis on ensuring that our membership know of, and about, the GSA has continued. This has seen a steady rise in the number of marketing outlets that the GSA has been using on a regular basis. The GSA has continued to build on its previous strategy of ensuring that the teaching and supervision staff of the University were well informed about our work, and to pass on that information to their students when needed. We have also worked hard on our online presence, enhancing the website and social media footprint; and continued to work on our print media, through our leaflet series. To this end, we decided to invest in a new member of staff with responsibility for communications, as well as policy, to replace the departing Representation and Administration Assistant.

Providing a better service to our Principal Officers has been amongst the priorities for the past year, and this service was improved by the creation of, a part time staff position with specific responsibilities for policy analysis and briefings. This was initially a short term trial measure to allow the organisation time to assess its worth, and although the post holder moved onto a permanent role elsewhere, it was clear that the organisation was greatly enhanced by the position, and by merging the role with a communication brief, it allowed the creation of a fixed-term full-time position.

We have also worked hard to improve our links with the senior management of the University and to try and ensure that students have an easy progression into the University. To this end, we have worked closely with the student support team to ensure an integrated orientation program. Not only has this reduced the pressure and increased the efficiency of

the two separate teams, it has allowed the opportunity to ensure that parts of the student experience are not missed from this important part of a student lifecycle.

Work on improving the internal democratic measures, with renewed emphasis on the GSA Council, has been a priority for 2011/12. A working plan for the 2012/13 intake, to ensure that the Council is fully representative of the student population as well as effective and empowered to vocalise opinion and hold Principal Officers to account has been developed, involving the Principal Officers as well as the staff of the Association.

Considerable effort and investment has been spent on training both staff and officers, including the commencement of an annual training weekend for Principal Officers and staff, increased presence at conferences and more involvement with external reviews, such as the QAA review of the University of York. Furthermore, I joined a University study tour of six US universities to investigate how universities in the USA worked in a 'high fee' environment. This proved to be very successful and many ideas have been brought back, some of which, such as the Postgraduate Community Fund, have been implemented.

Lastly, the GSA is in a good position going forward, with a stable staffing base, healthy finances, established procedures, good direction from the Trustee Board and engaged students. It is however time for the organisation to move to the next level and 2012/13 will see work done on several areas of the student experience, not least enhancing the employability of our members, improving the coherence of the postgraduate community and ensuring that the postgraduate voice is heard in important decisions, such as the appointment panel for the new University Vice-Chancellor. Perhaps the biggest single piece of work, will be to create a long term strategic plan, which will be ready in time for 2013/14.

**Duncan Lean**





**Representation**



**Academic**



**Welfare**



**Sports**



**Events**



**Community**



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