

Annual Report 2013 / 2014

York GSA Annual Report 2013 / 2014

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Representation

Putting postgraduate issues firmly on the University's agenda

Representational changes

In 2013/14 the GSA made some of the largest changes to its representational structures in some time. Following research by some interns and a review by our Trustee Board into our officer structure; a proposal was put to and passed by the GSA Council to move away from having five part-time officers (President; Academic; Welfare; Services; Finance and Community) to having one full-time President and three Vice Presidents (Vice President (Postgraduate Student Engagement); Vice President (Postgraduate Student Activities); Vice President (Postgraduate Community Development)). In addition, the number of positions on the GSA Council was reduced from 42 to 20 in order to streamline decision-making within the organisation. A new emphasis was placed on growing our postgraduate networks and utilizing them as a means for two-way communication with the postgraduate population. Sub-committees of Council are now charged with regularly communicating and supporting networks.

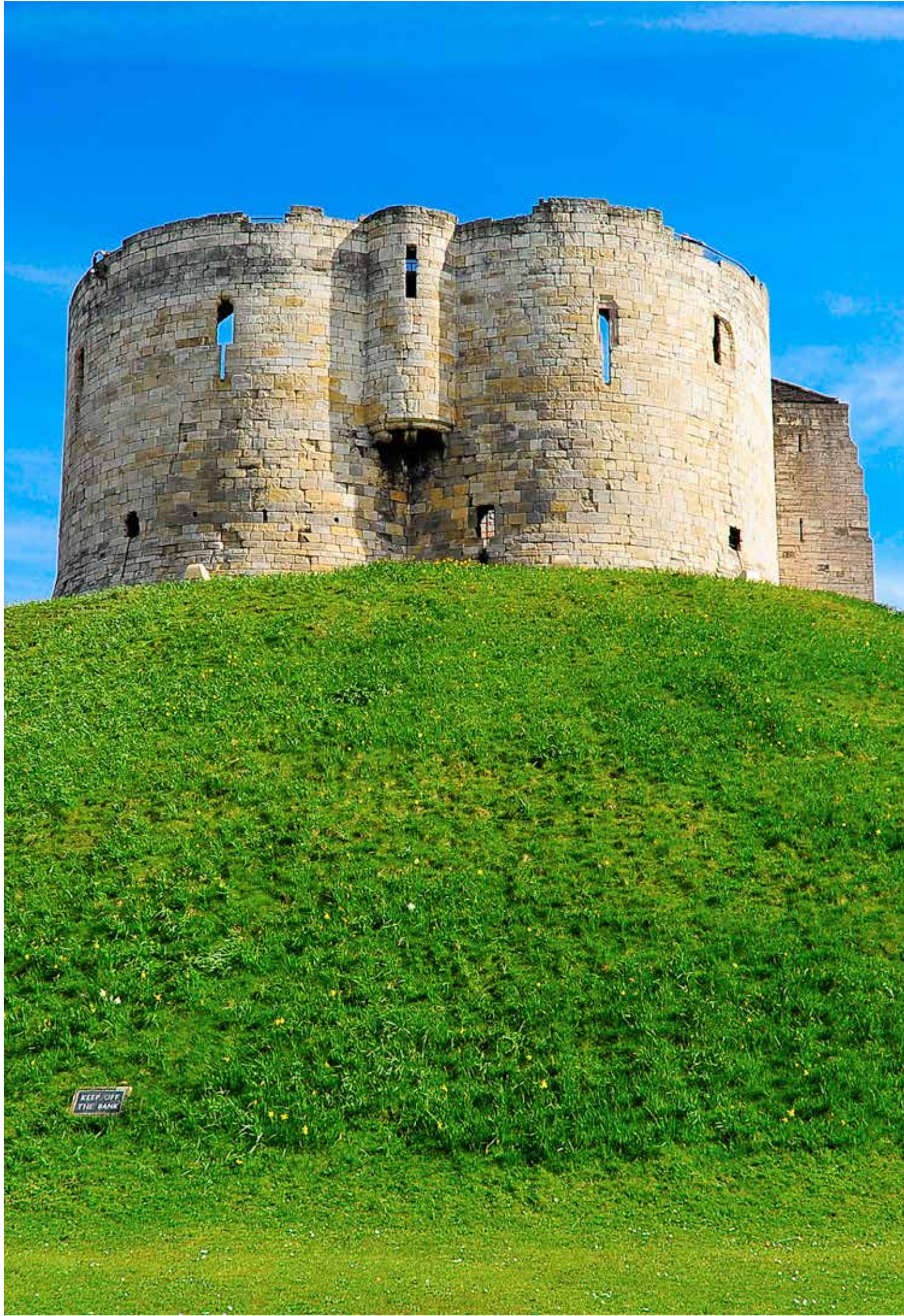
Representation at University Committees and in the wider community

GSA principal officers have continued to represent postgraduate students at all major University Committees, including: Council; Senate; Court; University Teaching Committee; Standing Committee on Assessment; Coordinating Group for Supplementary Programmes; Student Experience Committee; Student First; Distance Learning Forum; Equality and Diversity Committee; Ethics Committee; Library Committee; Health Safety and Welfare Committee; Campus Development Steering Group; Volunteering and Community Committee; Hull York Medical School Joint Senate Committee; and Policy and Resources Committee.

In addition, GSA officers and staff have attended a number of working groups and forums relating to the student strategy; postgraduate research policy; on-campus healthcare services; student cards; and student employability.

The GSA has also continued to strengthen its links with the City of York Council and other academic institutions across the City through Higher York and regular Student Community Partnership meetings.

Finally, GSA staff and officers have been making links with other postgraduate organisations such as Keele Postgraduate Association, as well as attending NUS Postgraduate Workshops. Two of our members of staff are on UKCGE Working groups looking at postgraduate funding and the postgraduate student experience.



Elections

Our Autumn 2013/14 election was cancelled due to problems with the data integrity of the voting platform and the fact that a significant proportion of the postgraduate population were unable to vote. As this election included a by-election for the Welfare Officer role - for which there was significant interest - the GSA suffered a severe hit to its reputation especially amongst newly arrived postgraduates.

Thankfully, our Spring 2014 election - the first under our new representational structure and the first to elect a full-time President - was a success, with none of the voting platform problems we experienced in the Autumn. Despite the fact that interest in a full-time position was unknown, it was a well-fought, close election with UK, European and International students being represented amongst the presidential candidates. Voter turnout was up by 34% aided by our new Marketing and Community Development Coordinator staff position as well as an intern who was hired specifically to assist with election promotion and administration.

Council and Trustee Board

The GSA Council has been an important aspect of the GSA's representational structure in 2013/14. Not only was it instrumental in passing constitutional and structural changes to the organisation, but postgraduate students on Council were able to raise issues they wanted the GSA to work on such as voicing concern at the impact the Immigration Bill 2014 would have on the international student population.

In 2013/14 the GSA also hired a postgraduate student as a Council Secretary.

The GSA Trustee Board has once again been an important arena for discussion, with valuable input from our external and student members. There was one change in personnel, as we welcomed Professor John Local onto the board replacing Connie Cullen, who stood down at the end of her term. Connie left the organisation with a detailed report suggesting future directions for the organisation which directly tied into our 2014-17 Strategic Plan.



Academic

Helping postgraduate students get the most from their studies

Course representatives

155 Postgraduate Course Representatives were elected to represent the views and interests of postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students across University departments. Course representatives are critical in ensuring that students' views are heard at departmental level and University level, and they provide the Principal Officers with invaluable feedback on postgraduate students' views. The GSA provides training for all course representatives and the Academic Officer has been the main point of contact for course representatives throughout the year.

Innovations in the course representative system in 2013/14 included holding dedicated course representative events such as a mince pie lunch near Christmas as well as the creation of a dedicated course representative Facebook group, and a mailing list.

Academic casework

The GSA has had another busy year supporting students with welfare and academic casework. The Representation, Advice and Welfare Coordinator has worked on 84 academic and welfare cases over the past year.

Welfare

Offering confidential, non-judgemental assistance, advice and support

In 2013/14 the GSA continued to foster a small number of dedicated postgraduate networks:

PhD Network

The PhD Network continued to meet regularly in a number of events that range from Sunday brunch, afternoons at the theater, to evenings of cheese and wine. This network seeks to tackle the isolation PhD students might experience during the course of their studies, and it does so by engaging them in non-academic activities where they can exchange experiences with their peers.

To that effect, the GSA supported, through the community fund, an event to bring PhD students together. 3D PhD, as the event was called, had three PhD students and one postdoc give short talks on their work and life outside academia. Students were then encouraged to ask questions and mingle.

The Network has been a source of information as well as a welfare providing exercise. Though it, the GSA has learned of the disparities in workspace provision faced by PhD students across departments. We have used that information to highlight this issue with the University, which will respond to it partly by the introduction of the Graduate Research School.

LGBTQ Postgraduate Network

The LGBTQ postgraduate Network is the response of the GSA to the lack of visibility of LGBTQ postgraduate community. This network has been an on going effort of the current and previous LGBT representatives, as they discovered the isolation experienced by these students. With this network, the GSA has arranged for these students to meet regularly every month.

The LGBTQ postgraduate Network was heavily involved in the LGBT History Month that happened across the city during February 2014. It participated in both planning several events held in the city and ran an event here in the University of York (Queer as a political concept), which attracted a lot of attention. The Network was invited to be part of a citywide steering group for future history month programs.

The network has links to other LGBT groups in the city and is involved in several campaigns to raise awareness, particularly an initiative to talk about LGBTQ issues with schools and school-aged children to tackle homophobic bullying.

Family Network

The family Network meets every other Monday in the St Lawrence Children's Centre for two hours in a beautiful and well-equipped room for childcare. With the support of the Student with Dependents Representative, the GSA has promoted the network far and wide to increase its visibility and as a result, reach more students. The groups contacted to disseminate word about the network and its activities include the mature students group, members of the Islamic Society, Halifax college tutors and the University's Nursery.

The Network also had three special events this year. First, a dinner at the beginning of the year for families to get to know each other. Then an event we organized with the charity Nuzzlets, where 16 families attended and both children and parents got a chance to interact with small farm animals to the delight of both groups. Finally, a trip to Whitby just for families, which completely sold out. Feedback for all events was overwhelmingly positive, with families asking for more of the same.



To meet the growing demands of this network and give it continuity, the GSA in partnership with the City of York Council, through its York Learning team, has organized for a child worker to deliver the sessions at St Lawrence Children's Centre and collect feedback from the families.

Race Equality Network

Our racial equality representative lead the effort to start a Race Equality Network to work with postgraduate students who have encountered racial discrimination in York or that are interested in this topic. We hope that this initiative will begin to tackle the growing concerns some groups of students have about incidents in the University and the city.

Equality and diversity

The GSA is committed to fostering an inclusive and supportive community in the University of York for postgraduate students. As a result we keenly monitor the student experience and highlight to the University the areas in which we find concerns. As part of that on going work we have presented a paper in the Equality and Diversity (E&D) committee on inclusive building design. This documents emphasizes the importance of the physical environment on the inclusivity of an establishment and suggests the adoption of a Gender Neutral Toilet policy in new campus buildings. The committee welcomed the paper and approved it for further discussion. Feedback from the Equality and Diversity office, the Registrar and several other members of the committee was very positive, and as a result meetings with University Planning and Estates have been held.

The University has developed and accepted a policy for "Maternity, paternity and adoption" for students. The GSA was heavily involved in the development of this policy, which has now been launched by the University at a public event.

The GSA also raised the issue of recurrent incidences of racial discrimination in York towards Muslim students. The E&D committee discussed the issue and agreed to address it via the senior management of the University and continued monitoring by the E&D office. Also a "Race Equality Group" has been formed, in which the GSA has participation, to tackle these problems.

Out of term support

The GSA understands that holiday breaks often mean little to postgraduate students. For that reason, it has campaigned to maintain different services in University available during those times and has produced, with the help of Student Support Services, guides to what is open and when during winter, spring and summer breaks.

The GSA is also organizing a series of workshops and stress free sessions to take place during the summer. With the support of the Open door team, Take A Break, which was first held last year, has been expanded to include workshops on dealing with anxiety and procrastination. Postgraduate students will be invited to stop working, have a drink paid by the GSA and explore ways of better using their time and learning about relaxation techniques.

The Winter hosting scheme held in December 2013 was a huge success. Feedback from the participants, both students and hosts, was incredibly positive, with students asking for an extension of the program.

Welfare casework

As the number of academic and welfare cases in the University increases, the GSA and YUSU have jointly appointed two new case workers. The cases faced by the advisers continue to be about accommodation, financial hardship and mental health issues. The GSA will continue to work with Student Support Services and YUSU to provide the best support and advice available to students experiencing difficult situations.



Sports

Providing both friendly and competitive sports opportunities – for free

Sports

The free postgraduate sport sessions provided by the GSA have once again proved extremely popular, with an emphasis on encouraging people to take a break from their studies and play non-competitive sports. Once again, we have seen a great mixture of nationalities and ages from across the membership, as well as new faces week on week.

In 2013/14 we have continued to work with the York Sport and YUSU to promote other sports sessions happening all over campus as well as working with York Sport to promote a range of subscription offers to students who may only be visiting the university for a short period of time - such as over the summer.

Services

Organising a range of social activities, entertainment and trips

Following feedback from our Family Network in 2013/14 our Services Officer led on some work that resulted in the City of York Council changing how it manages licences of Houses of Multiple Occupancy to make licensing arrangements more flexible; allowing landlords to make their houses available to both individual tenants and student families.

In addition we pushed for the university to increase the availability of its Guarantor Scheme in order to cover the needs of student families. Work on this will be ongoing in 2014/15

GSA Trips

The GSA organised 36 trips in 2013/14 to places across the UK, such as Edinburgh, Newcastle, the Lake District as well as more York-centric trips to the Theatre Royal, the National Railway Museum and the Yorkshire Museum. For the second year in a row the GSA provided a programme of events and trips for international students here over the summer on English language precessional courses.

Trips remain one of our few reliable non-university grant-based income streams.

GSA Events

The GSA's events calendar in 2013/14 could be characterised as being very collaborative with an emphasis on working with other aspects of the University, such as Colleges and the International Students' Association who we worked together very successfully on a Halloween 2013 party. The GSA employed postgraduates to give talks to postgraduates on the cultural and historical reasons for certain UK holidays like Halloween and Bonfire Night.



Community

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

Postgraduate Community Fund

In 2013/14 the GSA set aside £6,000 which could be bid for by students or staff in order to make a positive difference to the postgraduate community. Bids were considered by a five-person committee which included two GSA officers, a GSA member of staff and two senior managers at the University. In total, there were 28 bids to the fund totaling £22,724, a significant increase from 2012/13.

The Postgraduate Community Fund met its aims of supporting a diverse range of postgraduate activities, including: yoga mats for regular college yoga sessions; a 3-D PhD event at which students could present their research; funding for colleges to explore ways in which they could enhance their postgraduate communities; and funding for a children's worker to support the Family Network at its regular meetings at St Lawrence's Children's Centre.

Welcome Week

Despite the fact that Welcome Week and Fresher's Week were conflated due to a temporary change to the University's timetable - Welcome Week 2013/14 was very successful. It encompassed: airport collections; academic skills workshops; sports sessions; trips to a local supermarket; tours of the campus and city as well as a range of social activities designed to get new and old postgraduates to meet one another.

A thorough review of Welcome Week events - including the airport bus pickups provided by Student Support Services - demonstrated that the satisfaction of respondents increased from Welcome Week 2012/13.

The GSA is indebted to its partners, both internal and external, for making Welcome Week a success. In particular, the partnership with the Student Support Services has proved to be long-lasting and productive and the sharing of knowledge, expertise and resource made Welcome Week 2013/14 possible. The GSA would also like to thank its external partners at Glenn Coaches and Transdev York for the parts they played in the week.



General Manager's Report

2013/14 could be categorised as a year of significant change and forward planning for the organisation - with reforms to our representational structure and the creation of a three-year strategic plan amongst our most significant achievements.

Working under research and recommendations put forward by our Trustee Board; GSA staff and officers - including voluntary officers on Council - passed a wide number of changes to the GSA Constitution. We now have a full time sabbatical president, as well as three part-time Vice Presidents. In addition the number of positions on Council has been reduced in order to streamline our decision and policy-making process. Initial concerns about interest in a sabbatical position were put to rest in our May 2014 election where we had a strong field of candidates and voter turnout increased by 34%.

The creation of the Strategic Plan 2014-2017 represents a hugely positive step for the organisation. The foundations for the Plan were laid by Connie Cullen - a former trustee; however, it was largely produced by Elinor Unwin - a temporary member of staff - who conducted a detailed analysis of our current position as well as consultations with our key stakeholders. Elinor produced a very well researched document in a very short period of time.

Over the last year we have had a number of staff changes with Ruth Walton leaving as Representation, Advice and Welfare Coordinator and being replaced by Graeme Osborn in January 2014. Nishma Doshi joined us in May 2014 as Marketing and Community Development Coordinator. At around the same time our General Manager Duncan Lean left to pursue a secondment opportunity and I took up the General Manager role in an acting basis.

Looking forward to 2014/15 we are focusing on bedding in our new structure as well as monitoring our progress against our strategic plan key performance indicators.

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