





# York GSA Annual Report 2012 / 2013

Cover image courtesy of The University of York. Other images taken by postgraduate students.





# Contents

<b>Representation</b> .....	<b>7</b>	<b>Sport</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Representation at University Committees and in the wider community .....	<b>7</b>	<b>Events and Trips</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Elections .....	<b>7</b>	Events .....	<b>19</b>
Council and Trustee Board .....	<b>9</b>	Trips .....	<b>19</b>
Casework management software .....	<b>9</b>	<b>Community</b> .....	<b>20</b>
Employability .....	<b>9</b>	Finance and Community Officer .....	<b>20</b>
<b>Academic</b> .....	<b>11</b>	Postgraduate Community Fund .....	<b>20</b>
Course representatives .....	<b>11</b>	Charities and volunteering .....	<b>20</b>
Academic casework .....	<b>11</b>	Welcome Week .....	<b>21</b>
<b>Welfare</b> .....	<b>13</b>	Small Ads .....	<b>21</b>
Family Network .....	<b>13</b>	<b>General Manager's Report</b> .....	<b>22</b>
Equality and diversity .....	<b>13</b>		
Welfare survey .....	<b>15</b>		
Stress-free summer .....	<b>15</b>		
Welfare casework .....	<b>15</b>		



# Representation

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

### 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: a student strategy; postgraduate research policy; on-campus healthcare services; student cards; and student employability.

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

Attendance at committee meetings represents a significant proportion of the part-time principal officer's time. While officers are briefed prior to meetings, and policy development within the University are tracked by a member of staff and discussed at team meeting; the time remaining for officers to gather postgraduate opinion and formulate long-term policy and strategy is constrained under the current officer structure.

### Elections

2012/13 was a difficult year in terms of elections, with three separate by-elections due to a variety of reasons; issues with the online voting platform and a record number of election complaints from candidates. These issues have provided the GSA with some significant challenges.

In an effort to seek solutions to the problems which have arisen throughout the year, we commissioned a report on the current situation and a new set of Election Regulations, which were subsequently agreed by both the board of trustees and GSA Council. Although this process consumed significant amount of time and raised questions about the election process, we are confident that the new processes and procedures will significantly improve our elections in the future.

There is still work to do to improve the numbers of candidates, voter turnout and to define the role of individual positions of Council members.





## Council and Trustee Board

GSA Council has been a valuable part of the GSA's mechanisms for holding the GSA officers to account, as well as ensuring that the officers have the support of the postgraduate community for the actions that they take, and the manner in which they do so. The record number of candidates for Council has made for detailed and in-depth discussions about many facets of the postgraduate experience.

2012/13 was also the first year that the GSA offered council member training, and this will be further developed in the future as Council itself develops. Furthermore, GSA Council was, for the first time, properly supported by professional GSA staff. The intention is to continue with this level of support where possible for the future.

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 Tamasin Greenough Graham onto the board replacing Elspeth Harrow, who stood down. The board was further strengthened by Ian Pain, the current chair, agreeing to stay in role for a second term.

## Casework management software

This year, the GSA invested in a new web-based case management software package. This has led to greater efficiency in case work and a better understanding of student issues. General enquiries are now recorded separately to more detailed case work. This gives us a much clearer picture of the types of general advice and information that postgraduate students request. The reporting function enables us to gain a much greater understanding of the nature and types of cases and enquiries that we have dealt with over the past year. This data can be used to better inform future GSA campaigns and to help us to directly address the needs of, and better represent postgraduate students.

## Employability

The issue of postgraduate employability has been high on the agenda for the GSA in 2012/13. The Academic Officer commissioned a research report into the employability of the University's Master's level courses and work has continued to ensure that PG students achieve the right kind of support to enhance their employability. As part of Welcome Week, for the first time, the GSA included seminars on internships and 'how to find part time work', as well as placing an information booklet into every room on campus that was occupied by a postgraduate.

Further work will be required in this area for future years, and especially to ensure that postgraduate students have access to new opportunities. Therefore, work will continue with Careers, as well as other parts of Academic Registry.

The GSA has retained its commitment to using student interns at every opportunity, and 2012/13 saw a record number of interns in the GSA. They have provided a valuable addition to the current resource, by: researching elections, and redrawing the election regulations; analysing the feedback from events, trips, welcome week and the use of communications; researching employability; looking at ways of taking advantages of new income streams; researching and compiling a report on events as well as developing and providing a social program for students on pre-session courses.

Furthermore, in conjunction with Careers, the GSA funded PG internship subsidy scheme, has supported 10 PG interns working in SME's in the local York Community. This has ensured that it is not only cost-effective for a external SME to engage an intern but has ensured that the PG community are aware of the opportunities available.

# Academic

## Helping postgraduate students get the most from their studies

### Course representatives

160 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 provided training for all course representatives and the Academic Officer has been the main point of contact for course representatives throughout the year.

The GSA is committed to supporting course representatives and enhancing the role of course representatives in 2013/2014 through a more structured training programme and regular drop in sessions for course representatives with GSA principal officers.

### 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 101 academic cases over the past year. The implementation of a new case management system has helped to identify and monitor trends in case work which, in turn, has allowed us to tailor our support for students. In recognising that a large proportion of the academic case work over the past year has involved academic misconduct, we have worked proactively with the Academic Support Office to organise a series of workshops during the 2013/2014 Welcome Week to enhance academic skills and students' understanding of academic integrity. Working with the Academic Support Office, we also organised dissertation workshops during the summer term to support Master's students over the dissertation writing period.



# Welfare

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

### Family Network

The Family Network has continued to meet regularly in St Lawrence's Children's Centre and the GSA has supported additional events and activities for the members of the network throughout the year, including; an arts and crafts session; a trip to Creepy Crawlies; and a cartoon fancy dress afternoon.

The Family Network has proved to be an invaluable method for representation and, through attending Family Network events and meetings, principal officers have been able to find out about challenges faced by student families. The issues of finding and securing suitable family accommodation, and safety and security around family housing at Halifax were brought to our attention as matters of growing concern. Through working collaboratively with the University and the College in highlighting the problems, new doors for Garrowby Way houses were replaced ahead of schedule and additional measures were taken to ensure residents felt safe in their houses. The GSA is working with Higher York and the City of York Council to highlight the problems that many student families experience in finding private sector accommodation. This will be a key area of work carried forward by the new Welfare Officer in 2013/2014.

### Equality and diversity

A focus of the GSA's work over the past year has been on looking at improving community relationships between local York residents and international students. The GSA attended a 'Community Conversations' event in October 2012 and we have forged close links with the City of York Council – through the Higher York initiative – to look at this issue and the way in which local non-student residents and postgraduate students view one another.

Individuals on the GSA Council Welfare Team have also been actively involved in building communities with the postgraduate population and alerting us to issues faced by particular groups.

Following student feedback, our gender equality representatives asked the University to review its policies around student pregnancy and maternity. The University have agreed to conduct a review of this in 2013/14 and the GSA will feed directly into that review.

Our LGBT representatives have successfully created a small but growing group of LGBT postgraduates who meet socially and have strong links with YUSU LGBT networks and other on-campus and City of York LGBT groups.





## Welfare survey

The GSA Council Welfare Team conducted a survey to find out what issues mattered the most to postgraduate students. The survey was carried out in January 2013 online and had a high response rate. In general, students were satisfied with the welfare services that the GSA provides. The survey did however indicate that the organisation could do more to raise awareness of current provision and to signpost students to other services on campus and in the community. This strand of work will be taken up by the 2013/14 Welfare Officer and Welfare Team.

## Stress-free summer

The Welfare Officer headed a 'Stress-free summer' initiative, that ran from July to late September 2013, to support taught postgraduate students completing dissertations. Weekly meditation sessions were run in conjunction with a local community group and focussed on mindfulness and dealing with pressure and stress. A dedicated team of GSA volunteers ran a weekly 'take a break' session in the library foyer and gave out free drinks vouchers for the Library Cafe. This initiative was designed to encourage Master's student to take a break from their studies and get together at the same time and place to share experiences and support one another through the dissertation writing period. These events were well attended and feedback was collected from the students that will help to shape future summer support initiatives.

The GSA, with support from the Open Door Team, provided a wealth of information on its website about staying healthy, staying fit, relaxation, mindfulness and self-help techniques to address common problems like anxiety, procrastination, stress and worry—amongst other things. Feedback from students about the stress-free summer was overwhelmingly positive and we hope to enhance the summer support programme in 2013/14 by working collaboratively with other support services at the University.

## Welfare casework

This year, the GSA has continued to provide information, advice and support to postgraduate students. The implementation of the new case work management software has allowed us to record enquiries separately to more in depth cases. The majority of the enquiries dealt with over the past year have been welfare related and included issues like: housing and accommodation concerns; financial issues; maternity information; and general well being advice. The GSA has worked proactively with University Support Services and YUSU to provide postgraduate students with the best level of support and advice and we will continue to work collaboratively in 2013/2014 to ensure that student well being remains a high priority across the University.





# Sports

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

## Sports

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

Although the decision was taken to reduce the number of sports centrally funded by the GSA for 2013/14, the Officers are very much of the opinion that by making better use of the University facilities, the same level of engagement in sports will be maintained.

The GSA welcomes the University’s investment into sporting facilities and looks forward to working with York Sports Village and Sports Centre as well as YUSU over the course of 2013/14 to ensure that PG’s have access, and are taking advantage of the facilities available.





# Events and Trips

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

### Events

Events, once again have proved hard work and great fun, with a diverse range of events taking place. 2012/13 saw a strong events team leading a number of different types of events, in collaboration with many other groups across campus.

For the first time, the GSA have taken a lead on organising an events schedule over the Christmas period, traditionally a difficult time for those students who remain on campus. Through working with colleges, departments and YUSU, there was a comprehensive schedule of events, and support available for students.

The GSA also worked extremely closely with the Chinese Students and Scholars Association (CSSA), International Students' Association (ISA), YUSU, colleges, university departments and external organisations to put on a celebration for Chinese New Year. The Gala event, one of the biggest of the year, involved performances from students across the University and from many nationalities. The organising committee was awarded the Vice Chancellor's Gold Award for Internationalisation.

In order to improve performance, the GSA commissioned a report and outline plan for events for the future, which will feed into the forthcoming strategic plan. Some of the recommendations from the report which have been enacted were the need to better evaluate events as well as an easier to follow planning process. Both of which, we hope, will start to produce results in 2013/14.

### Trips

In 2012/13 the GSA have run a total of 33 trips to local York attractions, such as the National Railway Museum; Chocolate Story. Cities in the UK, such as Newcastle, Durham and Manchester. Areas of natural scenery, such as the Lake District, Yorkshire Dales and Moors. And trips to specific events, such as a Premiership football match and a trip to the theatre. Furthermore, we offered a range of half-day, full day and multi-day trips

As usual, our trip offering remains extremely successful and popular, as well as an important income stream for the GSA. In line with our continual drive to ensure that we are getting the benefit out of this area of work as well as informing future plans, we commenced a standard feedback mechanism for all trips including satisfaction ratings and an analysis of value for money, both of which are consistently high. We will also be working to ensure that trips add further representational benefit to the GSA in the year ahead.

We will continue to offer a diverse range of trips in order to underpin one of our key objectives: integration of the international and home student communities. We envisage greater cooperation with groups both in the University, and externally to make trips to lesser known areas more achievable. We are also developing relationships with providers in an effort to offer different types of trips in the future.



# Community

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

### Finance and Community Officer

Following discussion with our Board of Trustees, it has been decided to continue the trial role of a Finance and Community Officer to allow for continued focus on this area of work. This area of work will become more established within the organisation over time, and is an important part of ensuring that the profile of the GSA is raised in the external community and that internal communities are supported adequately.

### Postgraduate Community Fund

Following the publication of the 2011 GSA Community Report and in recognition of the diversity within the postgraduate community, the GSA decided to move away from an exclusively college-based Graduate Common Room funding model towards a model which supports the natural groups and associations within the University and postgraduate communities.

In 2012/13 the GSA set aside £5,000 which could be bid for by students or staff. 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 41 bids to the fund totaling £14,629.42.

21 bids were either wholly or partly successful and a total of £4,376 was claimed by the end of the financial year.

The Postgraduate Community Fund met its aims of supporting a diverse range of postgraduate activities, including: a networking event for Social Science PhD students; a research presentation competition; advertising for free student-led Bulgarian language lessons; a Diwali event; the publication of an anthology of postgraduate creative writing; and support towards Vanbrugh Graduate Common Room Committee meetings.

In comparison to its 2011/12 funding of Graduate Common Room Committees the GSA has increased the amount of support it gives to student-led activities fivefold.

The Postgraduate Community Fund has been one of the GSA's successes in 2012/13 and in 2013/14 we plan to make improvements to the management of the fund and the advertising around it to ensure that bids are well-developed and timely. We also plan to work with colleges to ensure that their Graduate Common Room Committees are well supported, both through the fund and logistically where possible.

### Charities and volunteering

Thanks to the efforts of the Principal Officers and two very dedicated Communities, Charities and Volunteering (CCV) officers the GSA has been able to successfully increase the amount of information it gives out to the postgraduate population about volunteering opportunities in the York area. The CCV officers built and maintained links with the University's Volunteering Unit and with YUSU in order to start a Facebook group and a dedicated place on the GSA's website to list volunteering opportunities.

There remain some attitudinal and procedural barriers for international students to overcome before they can successfully secure voluntary roles. Overcoming these barriers will be a task for the new Finance and Community Officers and Community Teams.



Welcome Week

Welcome Week was the biggest that the GSA has ever run, encompassing: airport collections; academic skills workshops; sports sessions; trips to a local supermarket; tours of the campus and city (and the Yorkshire Dales); as well as a range of social activities. Due to the popularity of the Welcome Week, it has been necessary to, for the first time, bring in ticketing for some events. This is not only a positive reflection on the organisation, but has also allowed the GSA to properly analyse and understand demand for the future.

For the first time, a student intern was engaged to analyse and report on the week itself, and following extensive gathering of feedback has allowed the GSA and the University an insight into the needs and demands of this important time of year. It was, therefore, encouraging to note that 89% of the available capacity (at ticketed events) was utilised from students from all colleges and departments, as well as engaging students who were not resident on campus. Lessons were also learnt and small adjustments will be made to future Welcome Week's to ensure that the some of the smaller issues are avoided.

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 not only possible but effective. In particular, the GSA would like to thank its external partners at Morrisons Supermarket, Glenn Coaches and Transdev York for the parts they played in the week.

Small Ads

Through direct representation to the GSA Council, several students expressed the need for a university-wide small ads system for students to buy, sell and swap items at a local level and without paying listing fees. The University used to run such a service but it was shut down due to resource implications.

Having heard from students that there was a need for such a service, we researched our options and created an self-service online forum integrated into the GSA website. This forum requires registration and minimal moderation. Small ads went live in November 2012 and has been endorsed by the University as the official place for students and staff to place adverts.

General Manager's Report

**2012/13, was one that the GSA worked hard to ensure stability across all areas of its work. Whilst the organisation has been largely successful at this, it has also had to deal with a number of internal, and external pressures. The organisation is in a good position, however, to learn from the experiences of 2012/13 and yet again build on them for the future.**

We have continued to work to raise the profile of the organisation, both within the University and outwith, in the local community. To help us with this, the principal officers have been working on developing the graduate community through a number of different initiatives. Perhaps the most obvious was seen in Welcome Week, where all new members were given a GSA t-shirt, instantly ensuring an association with the graduate community. This was soon followed with 'the Big PG Photo'. These two high-profile events were underpinned by the operations of the Postgraduate Community Fund, which, for the first time, has allowed the GSA to support student led initiatives from colleges, departments, social groups as well as individuals. The range and depth of ideas have exceeded our expectations, and our funding boundaries, leading to an increase in funding for this area for 2013/14.

We once again have been working to provide a better service to our officers, and volunteers. We worked on training sessions for course representatives, and council members (with a high turnout), and have professionally serviced the GSA Council for the first time. Furthermore, we made a positive commitment towards the development of policy and communications, by making this a permanent role in the organisation. Our staffing compliment changed once more, when Kay Mitchell took up a position in the University of York, and we welcomed Ruth Walton to the team. Ruth has slightly altered the provision to be more casework orientated, and the organisation has supported this through the purchase of case management software. We have once again made use of the Student Internship Bureau at the University, to good effect, with a total of five joining us throughout the year to perform specific research tasks.

In an effort to enhance the GSA's work, we have been utilising every opportunity to gather feedback on both our own work and that of the University. Inevitably, this has led a higher level of administration and increased statistical generation. This is a positive step forward and over the next few years, the organisation will be able to ensure better use of longitudinal data, as well as ensuring that the officers responses to consultations and issues which arise throughout the year can be swifter and better evidenced.

The well documented issues with the GSA voting platform, and elections in general, have caused significant concern for the association, and we are working with our partners to ensure that issues are resolved for the future.

Looking forward to 2013/14, we look forward to welcoming the new Vice Chancellor to the University and further ensuring that the postgraduate voice is not only heard, but acted on at all levels of the University. Internally, it is time also to review the direction of the organisation, and led by the GSA Board of Trustees, whom I am very much indebted, much of this work has been going on behind the scenes. It is envisaged that this work will be completed by Summer 2014 and lead to a three-year strategic plan for the organisation.

**Duncan Lean**





**Representation**



**Academic**



**Welfare**



**Sports**



**Events**



**Community**



GSA Office, 201 Wentworth College, University of York,  
Heslington, York YO10 5NG

Telephone: **01904 32 2718**

Email: **info@yorkgsa.org**

Website: **www.yorkgsa.org**

Twitter: **@gsayork**

Facebook: **www.facebook.com/YorkGSA**

The GSA is a registered charity in England and Wales (no. 1142381)

