



Annual Report 2015 / 2016



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Representation

OFFICER AND COUNCIL RESTRUCTURE

2015/16 saw the GSA continuing the review of its representational structures. While the introduction of the full-time President had been a huge success this was not mirrored in the part-time officer roles. Part-time officers struggled to find the balance between their GSA role and their academic work, particularly those studying for a Masters degree. In addition the GSA council had struggled with the transition to non-portfolio roles which saw a low number of students nominating themselves for those positions.

A second consultation was carried out involving students and key stakeholders, to design a new representational system, based on the successful elements that were introduced in 2013/14. The end result was a structure with two full-time sabbatical officers: one focussing on academic and representation, the other welfare and community.

Below this would sit a smaller council of 10 postgraduate students, each with a specific role focussing on the GSA's key areas of work and better representing postgraduate students.

The new structure was formally proposed and unanimously approved at the Annual General Meeting in May, which had a record turnout.

REPRESENTATION AT UNIVERSITY COMMITTEES

This year the GSA President has worked hard to ensure there was a consistent, informed postgraduate voice on all university committees. Through our work on these committees and collaboration with the newly formed York Graduate Research School (YGRS) the GSA has been able to implement a number of changes to improve the lives of postgraduate students. We have included some of the more significant highlights below.

Thanks to our work with the YGRS, from this year onwards University of York students will have a say in the selection of their external examiners. This was a major change in the examination procedures for PhD students, which will mean that students are now involved in the examiners selection process. This change will mean that students can highlight possible conflicts of interest at the very start of the process.

Working with both the Registrar and University Special Cases Committee, the GSA was able to ensure that any students that were affected by the floods that hit York during Christmas holidays were given an extended deadline for appeals and submissions.

The GSA was able to use its international knowledge to ensure the University was aware of circumstances that may affect the welfare of international students. This year saw financial crises in a number of countries like Greece as well as political unrest in the Middle East, all of which had significant impacts on students ability to study. Our officers were able to work with both YGRS and the Student Support team to provide support to students affected and ensure they could continue their studies.

Another big win for the GSA this year was extending the working hours of the University shuttle bus to run outside term dates for the first time. This extension is of great help to postgraduate students in general and in particular those with families, who rely on the bus to take their children to and from school.

ELECTIONS

The GSA runs two sets of elections each year, one in Autumn and one in Spring. We run two sets of elections due to part-time officer roles, running elections early in the first term is the only way to allow masters students to hold the part-time officer posts.

Overall the Autumn elections were a moderate success for the organisation. We had seven candidates running for the 4 positions. This is a slight decrease on last year despite an increase in the work carried out to promote the elections. We had an overall voter turnout of 6.8%.

The Spring elections were slightly disappointing for the organisation. We had anticipated a large number of candidates running for the two full time officer positions due to a large number of interested parties prior to the nomination process. We had five candidates for the two positions. We had an overall voter turnout of 5.3%.

While both sets of elections ran smoothly many students fed back that they found the voting process confusing and overly onerous. In addition to this there was a much higher level of complaints in the Spring elections than in previous years. Both of these areas will be reviewed for the 2016/17 elections.

Academic

COURSE REPRESENTATIVES

The Course Rep system plays an important role in student representation, allowing both the departments and the GSA to get direct feedback from students about departmental issues. This year we were able to recruit 120 postgraduate course reps, however only 34% of the postgraduate reps attended their initial training.

The potential reasons for this low take-up in training and unfilled course rep positions seems to be the differences in the way reps are elected across departments. Some use the YUSU election platform, some run their own online elections and some ask the GSA to run in-person elections.

These variances mean that postgraduate positions generally suffer from lower numbers of candidates, lower voter turnout and higher numbers of unfilled positions. This combination means that the positions are sometimes empty when the main training is carried out. The issue is further compounded by departments not informing the GSA of the results of their internally-administered elections. Despite repeated emails to administrators, we only found out the details of the Reps from a couple of departments in the second half of the academic year. The GSA plans to review the postgraduate course rep system in the near future.

FACULTY FORA

Capitalising on the introduction of Faculties and with them postgraduate faculty representatives, the GSA organised a number of faculty fora throughout the year. These gave Course Reps a chance to feedback issues to the GSA, as well as to find out what the GSA was working on and what was going on outside their own department.

These were well attended, and proved to be very useful for both Course Reps and the GSA. We were made aware of a number of issues facing students in particular departments (such as Environment), issues affecting postgraduates across the University (such as work and desk space) and were able to consult Reps about issues brought to us by other departments (such as library space and usage).

ACADEMIC CASEWORK STATS

This year proved a busy one in regards to postgraduate casework, with our caseload growing by 99% to 149 individual cases. While the number of cases may look small, postgraduate cases are often extremely complex with most cases taking months to come to a resolution.

This year we introduced a customer satisfaction system to our casework appointments to monitor the levels of student satisfaction. Despite reservations we received 77 feedback cards with most students who had a face to face appointment filling out a card. Next year we will be looking at how to gather feedback from students who we support via email and skype. 96% of students said they were satisfied with our advice service with 57% of them saying they were extremely satisfied.

“I WISH I HAD DONE THIS EARLIER”

96% OF STUDENTS WERE SATISFIED WITH OUR ADVICE SERVICE

“EASILY ACCESSED, NEXT DAY APPOINTMENT, GOOD ADVICE GIVEN AND LEFT FEELING MORE POSITIVE, THANKS”

“FEEL MUCH BETTER AFTER TALKING. THANKS A LOT”

“IT WAS A RELIEF TO BE ABLE TO DISCUSS IT”

“VERY SUPPORTIVE BUT ALSO REALISTIC”

MENTAL HEALTH

A large part of this year's activity focussed on mental health, both in the University and the city. Officers participated in city-wide mental health discussions and the newly founded Student Mental Health Network to ensure that postgraduate requirements were taken into consideration when addressing student mental health needs in the city.

MIND YOUR HEAD

Building on our initial work last year the GSA's student-led mental health initiative Mind Your Head went from strength to strength. The Mind Your Head team were able to recruit a network of well over 100 volunteers at the start of term and used this team to run a number of awareness-raising and support activities throughout the year aimed at, not only supporting postgraduates, but undergraduates and university staff as well. Mind Your Head proved so successful in 2015/16 that it was nominated and won a Higher York Volunteering Award.

EXAM STRESS CAMPAIGN

We ran a number of campaigns aimed at getting students to take a break from their studies to coincide with key postgraduate examination and submission dates. GSA Officers visited the library and postgraduate study spaces to distribute goodie bags containing a GSA mug, hot chocolate, marshmallows, chocolate biscuit, advice service leaflet and motivational quotes. The activity was well received by students and led to a number of follow up contacts with our advice service.

FAMILY HOUSING

This year the GSA has organised a number of meetings with the University space manager and accommodation manager to raise the problem of the long waiting list of students with dependents. Our Officers were able to provide supporting statistics to the University Steering Group to influence future accommodation provision. The GSA started work with the York Landlords Association to encourage them to rent to student families, while this work remains ongoing the GSA started a scheme to encourage those leaving family accommodation to share it with others in the family network.

2015/16 HIGHER YORK VOLUNTEERING AWARD WINNING TEAM FROM MIND YOUR HEAD



Community

NETWORKS

The GSA continues to support the development of its dedicated postgraduate networks, driving to make them student led and providing each network with its own budget and responsibility for spending.

PhD Network

The PhD network continues to offer a range of social activities including Coffee & Cake and Wine & Cheese alongside a growing number of academic and training focussed events and seminars. This year the PhD network invited external speakers to come and present to new PhD students about the PhD journey and how to prepare for life as a PhD student, these events were extremely well attended.

College Tutor Network

The College Tutor network was a new creation for 2015/16, designed to provide college tutors (who are all postgraduate students) with a safe space to socialise and support each other. The network also played an important role in dealing with college tutor grievances over their volunteer agreement, by providing them with a safe channel to feedback to senior college staff via the GSA.

Masters Network

The Masters network delivered a number of small scale events throughout the year but struggled due to the lack of a regular coordinator. The coordinator role proved challenging to masters students who didn't have the time to dedicate to putting together a calendar of regular events. Hopefully additional staff support in the future will mean we can provide more events for masters students.

LGBTQ Network

Along with regular social activities the LGBTQ network took an active role in citywide LGBT History Month organising seven events across the whole month designed on a range of LGBT topics. The GSA was extremely proud to play such an active role in the month, ensuring that the University of York was an active participant.

Family Network

The Family network continues to benefit from a weekly play session at the St Lawrence's Centre every Monday, although numbers tend to fluctuate throughout the year this continues to be a popular session with a number of home and international families. This year the Family network organised a number of family trips to various local attractions including Eureka and the Railway Museum, this led to the introduction of subsidised childrens tickets on all GSA trips.

The family network continues to make excellent use of the online facebook group, which has become an invaluable source of information and support for students with children. The group often shares tips, local info and even unwanted furniture and clothing. The group is entirely student run and is a fantastic example of the what students can achieve when they support each other.

Distance Learner Network

Due to the growing number of online and distance learners the GSA trialed the development of a distance learner network. Despite our best efforts and engaging with several distance learners there was no real demand from students for the network and the officers instead decided to focus our efforts on working with the University's new Distance Learner College Officer and their work around setting up a Distance Learner College.



Community

PG COMMUNITY FUND

The postgraduate community fund continues to be extremely popular receiving significantly more projects than we can fund despite an increase in the available funding this year. There were three rounds of the community fund this year in which the following projects were funded:

Psych £555

An interactive, family friendly, all day public science event in the centre of York in August of 2016, run as part of the festival of ideas.

WISE21 £829.20

An inter-University conference on the theme of Education, the first to be held at the University of York. Created and organised by a team of postgraduates from the Department of Education.

greenSTEMS £650

A group of early-career researchers across a range of disciplines at the University of York organising a social seminar on the unsustainable practices behind the clothing Industry.

STFU £1000

A pioneering electronic music festival based in York and organised by postgraduate students in Electronics and Film and TV.

Goodricke College Talk £1000

Funding to help with the development of a campus wide initiative on inclusivity and respect, including well known american rapper Jay Smooth.

Vanbrugh Graduate Community Furniture £302.75

Funding for some garden furniture items for the Vanbrugh college garden, aimed at increasing the usage of the space alongside their programme of postgraduate events.

Langwith Summer Garden Party £300

A traditional summer garden party for all students providing an activity outside of term time on the Heslington East campus. This event was a huge success and well attended by postgraduates and international students.

While the projects funded by the community fund were all fantastic and interesting there was a feeling from the Officers that the fund should be used for activities which would build the postgraduate community rather than conference activity being carried out by postgraduates. This would be an area for development in the coming year.



WINTER HOSTING SCHEME

The GSA continued to run its winter hosting scheme in partnership with the International Team, designed at providing international students with the opportunity to experience a traditional British Christmas during the winter break. The scheme proved extremely popular this year with 106 students applying for a place. Despite a strong push to recruit more hosts this year and a number of the 24 hosts taking one student, we were still unable to place all of the students. This was made all the more frustrating by a number of the students who were given places either withdrawing from the scheme at short notice or not turning up on the day, we will be looking at ways to mitigate this in the future.

» Services

EVENTS

The lack of dedicated staff and change in the student council meant that the dedicated events team of the past were no longer a part of the GSA. This meant the 2015/16 events calendar for the GSA was a much smaller affair seeing an increase in student-led events and those run in partnership with other groups.

The GSA also partnered with Wentworth College to run a number of regular, joint events on Wednesdays for all postgraduates. Despite good attendance figures for these events, the need to underwrite the University commercial services bar meant that running the events on a regular basis became unsustainable. This led to the production of a GSA paper into the lack of postgraduate social space on campus which went to a University working group on the PGT student experience. The GSA will continue to campaign on this issue in 2016/17.

TRIPS

The GSA organised 20 trips in 2015/16, providing a mix of national city trips, cultural trips and local sight seeing. Unfortunately the lack of communications staff for 6 months of the year meant that we struggled to sell tickets for many of these trips, despite gathering student feedback on trip types and locations. With numbers on some trips far below the break-even point, a number of them were cancelled in order to mitigate a financial loss. Trips would normally have been our most reliable income stream outside of the university grant, so significant work will be put into ensuring interest in the trips picks up in 2016/17



"IT IS GREAT THAT THERE WAS A WELCOME PROGRAMME. IT REALLY HELPS TO GET USED TO NEW PLACE, MEET PEOPLE, BE IN ALERT AND NOT SO HOMESICK"

"IT'S REALLY REALLY NICE. AND THE PROGRAMME IS VERY CONSIDERATE. EVERYTHING IS INCLUDED DURING THE PROCESS. I FEEL AT HOME AS AN OVERSEAS STUDENT"

"IT WAS GOOD FUN!"

WELCOME WEEK

In Week 0, the GSA in partnership with student services, runs a postgraduate welcome week. The intention is to give postgraduates a warm welcome to the University, provide them with the information they need to succeed at university and an opportunity to socialise. Welcome week is a key part of a student's induction to the University, particularly for masters students who only have a year in which to experience everything York has to offer.

To this end the GSA put together a programme of events and activities designed to cater for the postgraduate community. This year the GSA put on the same welcome week programme as previous years as this had proved successful. The events covered everything from large parties to smaller social gatherings, information fairs to sightseeing tours.

THIS YEAR'S WELCOME WEEK WAS A HUGE SUCCESS WITH OUR CALENDAR OF EVENTS ATTRACTING A COMBINED 2499 ATTENDEES.

Student feedback from welcome week showed that the majority of students enjoyed the events and those that attended had a warm welcome to the university.

However many students did not know that welcome week was happening and had not received any information from their department or college about it, with several students not arriving until several weeks after all of the welcome activity. The GSA has already started working with YGRS to ensure that information gets out to students so that they know to arrive in week 0.

> Sports

FREE SPORTS SESSIONS

The GSA continued to offer its free sports sessions designed to encourage postgraduates to take a break from their studies and stay active. The sessions continued to prove popular with all postgraduates attracting students from all ages, backgrounds and nationalities. The GSA offers sessions in the following sports:

- Tennis*
- Badminton*
- Basketball*
- Football*
- Netball*
- Volleyball*
- Squash*



We carried out a review of the sessions this year, which showed that postgraduates really value the drop-in and play approach to the sports sessions and many would not be able to access any sport if the sessions were charged for. As always there were requests for additional sessions in current sports and new sessions like swimming to be added.

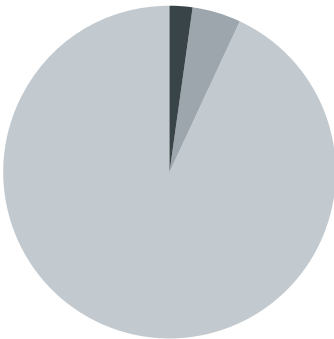
POSTGRADUATES AT VARSITY

The postgraduate Volleyball team that practice during the GSA sessions and whose uniform was jointly funded by the GSA and Wentworth college, participated in this year's college varsity against Durham. The team of postgrads won a decisive victory against the Durham team.

» CEO Report and Finances

2015/16 was a year of change for the GSA. The arrival of a new CEO in August brought with it a review of all the GSA’s activity to ensure it was still fit for purpose and meeting the needs of postgraduates.

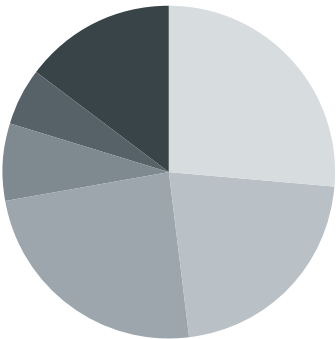
TOTAL INCOME
£195,263



- University Grant
- Other Income
- Event Income

These are all based on draft figures.

TOTAL EXPENDITURE
£185,653



- Representation
- Academic and Welfare
- Services
- Sports
- Community
- Overheads

The review highlighted a number of areas for improvement, the most significant of which was to our representational structures. The time constraints of the part-time officers combined with the growing representational need on university committees showed that more resources needed to be allocated to representing postgrads. A review of the existing structure was carried out this year and a new structure designed ready for implementation in 2016/17.

We created a new staff post dedicated to communicating to students and assisting with events and activities. This also meant that we could bring much of our design work in-house freeing up significant resources which could be spent on supporting postgraduates.

A full budget review was carried out to highlight where efficiency savings could be made and a number of areas including finance and external purchasing were identified, freeing up a significant amount of resources which could then be allocated to the new officer structure.

This year wasn't without its challenges though, staff sickness led to a sizeable gap in our events and communications activity and it wasn't until the recruitment of a new communications and events coordinator in January that the GSA was able to get back to delivering regular trips and events. Unfortunately the lengthy gap in activity meant that students were unaware of them and attendance at these activities was low.

Looking forward to 2016/17 the GSA is preparing for another exciting year of growth and development with the launching of new branding alongside a new website, a physical office move and the election of its first full-time officer team. Building on this strong foundation the GSA hopes to do even more to support postgraduates in the year to come.





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