

1602 Transforming the Graduate Student Experience at UEA

Passed 30 October 2014

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Union Notes

1. UEA is a good university with a good reputation for its "student experience". It consistently does very well in the NSS and last year came top in the Times Higher Education (THE) student experience survey.
2. UUEAS is a large registered charity with two trading subsidiaries and a turnover of £8m.
3. For some years a separately constituted Graduate Students Association has existed. It is a small unincorporated charity exempt from charity registration.
4. It has both a representational function and a social function, and a bar which is operated on its behalf by UUEAS under a management agreement.
5. As a legally separate organisation, the GSA bears administrative costs (ie insurance) that other groups that are federated into the union do not bear (ie Concrete).
6. The University is currently recognising and regulating two students' unions- the GSA "counts" as a Students Union under the Education Act 1994, and would be keen to reduce this to one, believing that the union's wider infrastructure should be supporting the functions that the GSA carries out.

Union Believes

1. The overall perception of the situation on campus is that there is a focus towards undergraduates and their experience/needs.
2. The Union has historically been widely perceived to not be interested in Graduate Students, with its leadership positions dominated by undergraduates and its social activity dominated by them.
3. The GSA is very poorly funded for the activity it carries out- just £5k a year comes in from grant funding and nothing is contributed by the Grad Bar once management costs are taken into account.
4. Few students believe that either the GSA or the Union act as effective representative bodies for postgraduate students.
5. GSA volunteers feel they have to spend considerable time "running" the GSA as an organisation, reducing the time they can spend on direct activity for the benefit of PG students.
6. During August and September the Union worked with the GSA to undertake a consultation with students on "Building a PG Community on Campus". Over 200 students took part and fed in detailed comments about both the proposed new Graduate Centre in Union House and the nature of activities and services that should be put on for PG students at UEA.
7. The conclusions of the consultation can be summarised as follows:
 - a. That a proper strategy for the representation of Graduate Students should be in place.
 - b. That dedicated social and recreational activity should be arranged for Graduate Students.

- c. That activity for Graduate Students should be led by them wherever possible, with autonomous organisation of Graduate Students enshrined constitutionally.
- d. That all groups of students on campus should be able to benefit from the underpinning infrastructure that the union has to offer.

Union Resolves

1. To progress plans to enhance the Graduate Student Experience at UEA, developing detailed plans that fulfil the following aims
 - a. Create a Graduate Students' Centre inside Union House, operated by the Union under leadership from PG students who will provide reps for a Graduate Centre Management Group. It should feature a fully-licensed bar, dedicated social learning facilities, bookable space and some office space for use by Union and University services focussed on postgraduates on a non-permanent basis.
 - b. Create a Graduate Assembly within the legal framework of the union with a specific remit of coordinating the representation of Graduate Students. With staff support provided by the union, it should direct the work of a committee headed up by the Postgraduate Education Officer and will support Graduate Reps and Committees across the University in their representative function.
 - c. To mandate the Postgraduate Education Officer to hold a referendum of postgraduate students on the proposal to merge the Graduate Students' Association into the legal framework of the union with a social and recreational function. With staff support and a budget provided by the union, it should coordinate a programme of trips, social, society and sporting activity focussed around Graduate Students both within schools and across the university.
 - d. Reform Union Council to create more dedicated spaces for PG students, and to cause the union's other functions- advice, opportunities, live music etc through a co-ordinated Graduate Students' Strategy, to be developed by the Postgraduate Education Officer in conjunction with reps from the GSA and GSC.
 2. To refer this implementation of this motion to the union Trustee Board, Student Officer Committee and Democratic Procedures Committee and to report to each Union Council on progress.
 3. To request that implementation of this motion also be considered by the Committee of the Graduate Students Association.
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Transforming the Graduate Student Experience at UEA

Introduction

UEA is a good university with a good reputation for its “student experience”. It consistently does very well in the NSS and last year came top in the Times Higher Education (THE) student experience survey. However both the indicators in use and the overall perception of the situation on campus is that there is a focus towards undergraduates and their experience/needs. This proposal seeks to address this issue.

The Situation

UUEAS is a large registered charity with two trading subsidiaries and a turnover of £8m. It however it has historically been widely perceived to not be interested in Graduate Students, with its leadership positions dominated by undergraduates and its social activity dominated by them.

For some years a separately constituted Graduate Students Association has existed. It is a small unincorporated charity exempt from registration. It has both a representational function and a social function, and a poorly performing bar which is operated on its behalf by UUEAS under a management agreement.

The Problems

- The GSA is very poorly funded for the activity it carries out- just £5k a year comes in from grant funding and nothing is contributed by the Grad Bar once management costs are taken into account.
- Few students believe that either the GSA or the Union act as effective representative bodies for postgraduate students.
- GSA volunteers have to spend considerable time “running” the GSA as an organisation, reducing the time they can spend on direct activity for the benefit of PG students.
- As a legally separate organisation, the GSA bears administrative costs (ie insurance) that other groups that are federated into the union do not bear (ie Concrete).
- The University is currently recognising and regulating two students’ unions- the GSA “counts” as a Students Union under the Education Act 1994, and would be keen to reduce this to one, believing that the union’s wider infrastructure should be supporting the functions that the GSA carries out.

The Past Year – The Union

Over the past year the union has been engaged in an internal reform process designed to improve its internal underpinning functions- management, HR, IT,

Finance and infrastructure. With this process almost complete in coming months the union will be focussed on its formal strategic objectives. These have been summarised as follows:

Advocacy: "We've got your back"

- We represent and campaign to give students power over their education
- We help students to help other students
- We sort (and prevent) students' problems with help, advice and support

Opportunities: "Beyond your degree"

- The best range of student sports and societies in the UK, no argument
- Opportunities to learn skills, make friends and become more employable
- Student employment that's fun, well paid and transformative

Enterprise: "We own this"

- Student bars, cafes and lounges- where everybody knows your name
- Housing for students- the most student focussed in Norwich
- A student run shop- things you want, prices you need

As of August 2014 it holds a formal lease on Union House with an expectation that it will keep up the facilities within.

In addition this year:

- The Union has taken on staff designed to support PG activity
- The Union is intending to redevelop union house and has earmarked an area for Graduate Students
- The union has split the previously overworked academic officer position into PG and UG.

The Past Year – The GSA

- The GSA has worked tirelessly on a limited budget to deliver for postgraduate students, and has had a degree of success in providing a programme of social events and a limited representative function.
- The GSA President currently sits on the Student Officer Committee. However, the GSA does not currently have democratic structures that determine both its policy and the work conducted by the GSA Committee. The GSA Committee members have indicated they would like to see the GSA become an organisation more capable of campaigning on behalf of postgrads.
- The GSA has run activities such as 'Postgrad Sport' that have been well received by postgraduates. This takes up a considerable section of the GSA budget, due to external costs and not being included in the student sport agreement between the University and the Students Union.
- Inability to invest in the Grad Bar space has made it increasingly outdated, financially less viable and less attractive to postgraduate students.
- The creation of the Postgraduate Education Officer role has alleviated some representative responsibility from the GSA, with the Union now representing postgrads on top-level university committees in seats previously held by the GSA.

Basic principles

- That a strategy for the representation of Graduate Students should be in place.
- That dedicated social and recreational activity should be arranged for Graduate Students.
- That activity for Graduate Students should be led by them wherever possible, with autonomous organisation of Graduate Students enshrined constitutionally.
- That all groups of students on campus should be able to benefit from the underpinning infrastructure that the union has to offer.

During August 2014 the Union worked with the GSA to undertake a consultation with students on "Building a PG Community on Campus". Over 100 students took part and fed in detailed comments about both the proposed new Graduate Centre in Union House and the nature of activities and services that should be put on for PG students.

Strategy for engaging postgrads as underrepresented students

The Union has recently been developing a strategy for engaging with traditionally underrepresented groups, including postgrads. A document submitted to the Democratic Procedures Committee states its strategic aims to 'integrate liberation and equal opportunities more directly into the wider work of UUEAS, helping to break down barriers to participation, as well as combatting structural oppression within the organisation and society at large.'

In order to achieve this, the Union has proposed 'caucuses' for each of the under-represented groups. These caucuses will be able to debate and discuss issues relevant to those under-represented students, and set policy recommendations for the organisation as a whole. This aims to empower under-represented students to be more involved in the decision-making process. As a currently under-represented group, postgrads will form part of this strategy.

Feedback from Students

In relation to the **Graduate Centre**:

- There is strong support for retaining a Graduate focussed Licensed bar, but a need for it to be improved/refurbished
- The bulk of respondents would also like this to work as a daytime/coffee focussed space
- Many respondents would like to see the space incorporate a quiet "Study Lounge" with individual and small group flexible space
- A number of respondents would like to see self-serve kitchen facilities introduced
- A number of respondents would like to see bookable rooms

In relation to Graduate focussed **Services**:

- The centre acting as a hub of information and first point of contact for university services is mentioned by a number of students
- Advertisement - physical advertisement - of ongoing research events on campus.
- Several respondents mention a printer service
- A number mention a substantial trips programme

- A number mention the space acting as a centralised centre for PG PPD information

In relation to **Events** and **Social Activity**:

- As above a number mention a substantial trips programme
- PG sport is valued but many would like to see PG societies or related activity
- Most would like to see some cross university formal socials around themes
- A number mention events with an Academic Theme- for example where students might present their research

In relation to **Challenges**:

- There are a number of Organisation and Management issues inside faculties that are clearly not being addressed currently
- Most respondents identify a lack of social life and sense of community, coupled with a clear sense of isolation for many
- A sense of "chaos" and lack of joined up thinking when attempt[ing to ask a question or resolve a problem
- A number of respondents raise pastoral/welfare issues that they feel are ignored or not properly supported

Addressing Students' Feedback

As a result of the feedback we are proposing the following:

1. The **Graduate Students' Centre** will be housed inside Union House and will be operated by the Union under leadership from PG students who will provide reps for a Graduate Centre Management Group. It will feature dedicated social learning facilities, bookable space and some office space for use by Union and University services focussed on postgraduates. Legal responsibility for liability and development will rest with the union, ensuring the facilities are part of the union's wider ongoing investment plan.
2. A **Graduate Assembly** will be established within the legal framework of the union with a specific remit of coordinating the representation of Graduate Students. With staff support provided by the union, it will direct the work of a committee headed up by the Postgraduate Education Officer and will support Graduate Reps and Committees across the University in their representative function. It will provide Graduate reps on University bodies and committees and will advocate for the rights of postgraduate students across the university. It will also be able to make policy recommendations to Union Council. A similarly constituted body for Undergraduates will also exist.
3. The **Graduate Students' Association** will merge into the legal framework of the union with a social and recreational function. With staff support and a budget provided by the union, it will coordinate a programme of trips, social, society and sporting activity focussed around Graduate Students both within schools and across the university. Legal responsibility for liability and insurance will rest with the union, freeing up GSA volunteers to focus on activities. The GSA will have its own budget and will be able to retain funds within a restricted fund within the charitable operation.

4. On a wider basis the Union's central representative body (the council) will also be reformed to create more dedicated spaces for PG students. In addition each of the unions other functions- advice, opportunities, live music etc will all be expected to develop a **Graduate Students' Strategy** in conjunction with reps from the GSA and GSC. This will ensure that these services develop in line with the needs and expectations of Graduate Students.

Conclusion

We believe these proposals can empower graduate students and allow for greater accountability at every level. Rather than moving power away from the GSA, the proposed federal structure would empower GSA volunteers, and through the structures created in the proposals allow them to direct the entirety of union work and policy for postgrads.

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There is still considerable detail to be worked out within this proposal with structures, timelines and constitutional matters to be determined. However at this stage we are seeking feedback on the proposals at a principal level. We believe that as outlined they represent both a solution to identified problem and a clear way in which the union can approach transforming the PG experience in the future for the better.