



# POSTGRADUATE FORUM

Feedback from the Postgraduate Forum (14th August  
2018)

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## Executive Summary

Hull University Union's President of Education, Isobel Hall, and Postgraduate Taught Officer, Lauren William's hosted the final Postgraduate Forum of the academic year (17/18) which was open to both postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students. The Vice-Chancellor was in attendance also.

The purpose for holding this forum was twofold. Firstly, to wrap up our Postgraduate Taught Officer's time in office by getting final formal feedback for academic year and to introduce the new President of Education. Secondly, it was noted by the President of Education, Postgraduate Taught Officer and the President Team, the lack of postgraduate representation at the University of Hull and therefore, the forum was designed as means to begin to rectify this.

The Postgraduate Forum was held on 14<sup>th</sup> August 2018 with the session being primarily led by the Postgraduate Taught Officer and President of Education. The latter half of the session was then handed over to the Vice-Chancellor who took questions from those in attendance. The Postgraduate Forum was very well received with 25 people in attendance of the event. Comments made after the event, were very appreciative of the time taken by HUU and the VC to talk to them about their experiences which made them feel more valued. In addition the presence of the VC at the event was noted and viewed as a strong commitment by the University to improving the postgraduate experience. Moreover, the good turnout of postgraduates enabled those attending to hear about the difference of experiences and the wide range of issues.

## Purpose of Report

This paper provides a comprehensive overview of the findings in the recent Postgraduate Forum hosted by the President of Education and Postgraduate Taught Officer to investigate the issues facing postgraduate students and potential ideas for improvement. It outlines the main types of issues relating to postgraduate students and the critical factors influencing them.

Therefore, the purpose of this report is to detail the remit of this Postgraduate Forum and to include the findings from the forum.

## Findings

Gaining feedback from our postgraduate community is crucial to upholding the ethos of Hull University Union and the University in which we are committed to continual improvement and greatly value the student voice.

Overall the forum was successful and provided key feedback which will be presented to the Vice-Chancellor, the Student President Team and our postgraduate community.

The findings below cover eight core points including; Lack of Space, Lack of Opportunities, Lack of Representation, Being Treated Like Professionals, Faculty Structure Change, Applications and Graduate Teaching Assistants, as well as including a section for other comments at the end.

### Lack of Space

The lack of space on campus for postgraduate students was a prominent issue raised at the Postgraduate Forum. This was with regards to the lack of departmental space, working/study space and social space available to postgraduate students. Subsequently, postgraduate students commented that they were made to feel isolated and not part of the university community.

- Suggestions to combat this issue included repurposing Hull University Union's Johnny Mac bar into a 'Postgraduate Association Bar' which could be used for as a social space for Postgraduate students.
- Moreover, many comments indicated frustration with the Library Postgraduate Lounge which is only available to postgraduate research students, thus isolating postgraduate taught students who are made to feel like they are not a valued member of our University in comparison. Further problems encountered by postgraduate students that comes from not having a dedicated library space is that they struggle to find quiet places to work, especially during busy times of the year. Therefore, a working and study space for postgraduate students would be greatly appreciated and hugely beneficial to them.
- Similarly, a chemistry postgraduate student commented that the space available to them mean that they have to wear full gear when entering. Therefore, it was suggested that space away from departments would be useful to postgraduate students. Comments were made with regards to the underused spaces postgraduate students had spotted around campus which could accommodate them.

Overall, there is a strong need for a space that postgraduate students can work, study, socialise and network in. As a postgraduate degree is individualised and thus can be very isolating, which increases the definite need for this issue to be addressed in order for the postgraduate students to feel part of the University community.

### Lack of Opportunities

With this issue, there was a very clear distinction in the difference of experience between postgraduate taught students and postgraduate research students. For example, there were many postgraduate research students who commented that they really enjoyed and found useful the 'Thesis Bootcamp', the 'Writing Retreat' and 'Skills Sessions', however felt such activities would be beneficial earlier on in the year. In comparison, there was a general sense of dismay amongst the postgraduate taught students present who felt frustrated and that they were 'forgotten' about because they were not offered similar opportunities. It was identified that both taught and research students would benefit from opportunities such as those listed above.

- Postgraduate students suggested that they would like to see collaboration between taught and research students. In addition, it was suggested that skills based sessions at the beginning of the academic year that would include organisational aspects, would be greatly received by postgraduate students. Similarly, the idea of a 'Teaching Conference' was suggested as an event that would generate a lot of interest.

### Lack of Representation

At the Postgraduate Forum, postgraduate students insinuated that there was a distinct lack of representation for the postgraduate community. Individuals expressed that they did not know about positions such as 'Postgraduate Taught Officer' and 'Postgraduate Research Officer' that Hull University Union offers. This is indicative of the poor level of communication postgraduate students receive with regards to how they are represented. In particular, postgraduate taught students expressed they felt very much underrepresented.

- Postgraduate student suggestions indicated that they like the forum set-up and that separate forums for postgraduate taught and postgraduate research students would be even better for generating discussions and getting specific answers to specific needs.

In addition, following on from the lack of postgraduate representation identified. It was also suggested that they was a lack of knowledge around what the direction is for the postgraduate student experience.

### Being Treated like Professionals

The idea that postgraduate students should be treated like professionals was widely agreed with and was a key issues that was raised during the Postgraduate Forum. There was debate between a professional working environment and the student experience, especially in relation to PhD students. Questions arose such as: 'what is expected of a student in their own subject area?' and how the postgraduate students should network and generate collaborative work, thus indicating an area for development. Individuals described their current 'work environment' as 'toxic, fractured, juvenile' and that 'no accountability is taken by PhD students and employees (technical, administrators and academics)'. In addition comments made that there was no sense of community or common goal as a PhD student.

### Faculties and the Faculty Structure Change

The relationship between postgraduate students and the faculties was something of deep concern for many of the postgraduate students in attendance at the Postgraduate Forum. Individuals cited that they felt there was a lack of consistency in procedures and regulations and also a lack of communication from their own faculty. Postgraduate students felt like they had no link to their departments reinforcing this common theme of postgraduate isolation. Moreover, concerns that their faculties were not equipped to deal with postgraduate issues and unable to take ownership was something keenly felt. The lack of knowledge about who are taking a lead of the postgraduate experience in each faculty was of concern to say the least as it was clear no cohesive community could be built. In addition, during the session students later commented they there was a tension between the Graduate School and facilities themselves and suggested that they should work together to be of benefit to students.

A point that came up during the session, was the concern postgraduate students had about how the faculty structure change will affect them. Individuals cited that the discontent amongst staff was something that keenly affected themselves and were anxious as to what the impact of this faculty structure change would mean for postgraduate students.

### Applications

Postgraduate applications was something touched upon during the session of the Postgraduate Forum. There was a sense that the less prestigious subjects studied, such as the arts, was valued less by the University. This was reflected in the decrease of scholarships offered to them. In addition, comments pleaded that the University moved away their intent focus on the ref.

### Graduate Teaching Assistants

At the Postgraduate Forum, postgraduate students were keen for further paid opportunities for them to be trained how to teach. In spite of this, postgraduates also commented upon the poor process in which this happens. This included postgraduate students receiving delayed payments for the graduate teaching assistant roles, confusion over form filling, and the pressures this consequently brings. The length of time in issuing contracts was a prominent issue, with an individual citing that it took 4 months for a contract to be issued after the initial request. Similarly, the professionalism and attitude of those dealing with graduate teaching assistants was comment to be poor. This was in regard to the length of time taken to communicate back to postgraduate students, the usefulness of that content subsequently, and the blunt responses was not appreciated.

The School of Mathematics and Physical Sciences was cited as the top school that this was experienced in.

## Other

One thing that was noted in particular by postgraduate students, was the lack of events specifically for them during WelcomeFest. Comments suggested that they felt there was the presumption that they had spent their undergraduate degree here and therefore knew how everything worked. This did not take into account those who did not previously study at the University of Hull, nor did it take into account mature postgraduate students who commented that after being away from academia for a period of time, they did not feel properly induction into the University. Where there were events for postgraduate students such as 'Skills Sessions', postgraduate students felt they were not aware of such events until later on in the year, which was disappointing as they felt the events would have been useful earlier on.

In addition, comments were also made about how Student Services deal with postgraduate students. The example given by the postgraduate student was that when they approach ASKHU and subsequently was appointed a well-being advisor, the advisor did not know how to deal with the postgraduate student. This was largely due to confusion around whether they were a member of staff or a university student. The postgraduate student was told; 'Well you're a PhD student, you should know what to do'. Thus indicating the lack of knowledge that staff have when it comes to dealing with postgraduate students.

- In light of this, postgraduate students suggested that targeted and specific events for postgraduates would be appreciated alongside 'getting to know you' sessions and introduction to the University type events. Individuals suggested a 'Speed Friending' type event which was widely agreed would be well received.

Another prominent issues raised was that lack of regard given to postgraduate students over the summer period. For example, individuals noted that emails that were sent from the University marketing team used terminology such as 'been away' and 'summer' which makes postgraduate students feel forgotten about.

- An awareness of marketing teams and those sending communications out to students that not all students are away over trimester 3 would ensure that the University is inclusive of all its students on campus. Acknowledgment of their postgraduate students would significantly improve their sense of community on campus.

In turn, the concept that postgraduates are not acknowledge as being here over summer translates across to the facilities and services that are provided them over trimester 3. An example given, was that the closure of Derwent Café over trimester 3 which meant that the FBLP Hub was not accessible this way had not been communicated with postgraduate students and they only found out when they tried to go that way, thus showing a deep lack of awareness and consideration for our postgraduate students that are still on campus. Other examples given included the closure of Sanc and the reduced stock in Spar in the Union building and reduced opening times of University Cafes.

- Moving forwards to improve, postgraduates suggested that where building works affect them, this should be communicated.
- Similarly, with regards to the early closure of services, postgraduates are understanding of the reasons why and the business needs to do so. However, suggested that there could be a

dedicated café that had longer opening hours than other facilities over the trimester 3 period.

Finally, comments have been made with regards to the number of printing credits that postgraduate students get and the limits on the number of library book loans. It was felt that due to the preparation involved for completing a Master's degree and the extensive reading expected of them, postgraduate students would like to see this reflected in an increase of the credits they are given. With respect to the number of book loans, postgraduate taught students have suggested that an increase of the book loan limit would be extremely beneficial to them.

## Recommendations

This section of the report considers the findings from the Postgraduate Forum as a whole and subsequently identifies the most apt solutions suggested. After careful review of all the responses, it is thought that these areas would impact the most in combatting student issues.

- **HUU President of Education** to review academic representation to empower postgraduate students to make more effective change
- HUU President of Education to continue to run Postgraduate Forums and share all Postgraduate Forum findings with the University Leadership Team
- **HUU President of Education** to start a Postgraduate Week with exclusive events for postgraduate students giving you the opportunity to network, socialise, explore opportunities available to just postgraduate students and meet new people. Include workshop about professionalism in the work place.
- **HUU President of Education** to recruit 'Postgraduate Champions' to sit on Postgraduate Working Group with the University
- **HUU President of Education** to fight to get postgraduates their own space on campus. To review Library Teaching Rooms as potential space and underused spaces across campus.
- **HUU President of Education** to take on feedback about printing to include in her printing objective
- **HUU Give it a Go** to host Postgraduate Speed Friending during WelcomeFest
  
- Establish 'Postgraduate Working Group' with appropriate **University** staff members
- Establish a Postgraduate Taught lead member of staff
- Share best practice between the **Graduate School** and **faculties** about opportunities available
  
- Pass on feedback to **Student Services**
- Pass on feedback to **Graduate School** about Graduate Teaching Assistants
- Pass on feedback to **University Marketing**
- Pass on feedback to **University Library**
- Propose idea of a Teaching Conference to **Faculties** and the **Careers Service**
- Get feedback from the **University Leadership Team** about Faculty Structure changes

## Conclusion

Findings in this report provides preliminary evidence which may relate to and feed into broader works of the Students' Union President Team to inform recommendations, proposals and plans for improving the postgraduate experience. Information in this report may be useful to any decision making considered by both Union and University staff members regarding any changes that may be implemented.

Postgraduate students have been fully involved and updated throughout the consultation process and it is encouraged that this level of engagement may continue to be maintained, informing postgraduate students of any further initiatives that come of this report or any intentions to run similar engagement methods.