

# Report to GU Council and Annual General Meeting

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## ***Current Projects and Initiatives***

### **Graduate Rights**

According to a Nature survey in 2017, 47 % of Ph.D. students have been through depression and anxiety due to the bullying and harassment faced during their Ph.D. studies. For 67%, the highly competitive research work surrounded by toxic and abusive supervision culture turned their research life into a nightmare, leading to loss of faith in academia and mental health problems, from chronic anxiety to clinical depression. One of the most alarming issue Ph.D. student's grapple with is the 'supervisor-student' relationship dynamics and related side effects stemming from it like the mental well-being and financial instabilities. Addressing the Ph.D. supervisor-student issue by improving the 'code of practice (CoP) for research students' and changing the existing toxic 'Ph.D. supervision culture' is a key priority for me this year. In this regard, I have suggested the following changes and points of discussion, among others

1. Outlining the facilities and resources for a particular research project available to the student at the beginning of the project. This could include office space, library access, laboratory access and license to software.
2. Encourage students to undertake a comprehensive self-evaluation on the technical prowess and know-how of key facilities relevant for the project, based on which the supervisor can discuss and recommend training and skills development programmes and/or methods.
3. I suggested the discussion and inclusion of an estimated frequency of meetings (and possibly emails/correspondence) decided upon by the supervisor, supervisee and advisor. These should be followed up with one email report to the student, with unambiguous identification of problem areas, and suggestions for how to tackle them, besides confirmation of success of the student.
4. A mechanism to discuss the supervision provided to a student, with potentially even reporting of problems faced. This is a contentious subject and at a very early stage of discussion with the University.
5. I feel one subject-specific workshop and a formal departmental feedback of the research work every year by someone from the subject area and in the department could help. This can help provide direction and idea as to where and how the project is progressing and could progress further. Some departments and faculties already have this. The expert giving this feedback will neither be the supervisor nor the advisor. This is in addition to active recommendation for students to attend workshops conducted by University of Cambridge Training on
  - a. Integrity and Ethics in Research (*in the first year*)
  - b. How to write an academic paper and get it published (*in first or second year*)
  - c. Copyright, Collaboration, and Creative Commons
  - d. Impact evaluation of research
  - e. Doctoral (*for MPhil students*) and Postdoctoral (*for Doctoral students*) prospects and opportunities

- f. Introduction to LaTeX, analytical software or other tools relevant to the project
  - g. Public engagement and research
6. The maintenance of a registry by the University or the departments to know the supervisor-supervisees who have signed the Code of Practice sign-up page, and to encourage those who have not done so, to do so after reading it.
  7. Progress Logs (<https://www.student-registry.admin.cam.ac.uk/information-supervisors/progress-logs>) must be filled in, during a PhD project, and the logs should be part of the induction pack and mentioned in the Code of Practice.
  8. Supervisor training must be encouraged and we have been discussing about the possibility of having online resources for this purpose. This is important for the well-being and quality assurance of supervision in the research degree.
  9. The inclusion of reasonable adjustments for visible and hidden disabilities in various clauses of the Code of Practice, and to focus on this important topic. Both supervisor and supervisee should discuss properly regarding any disability on either side and agree upon the reasonable adjustments that can be put in place.
  10. To set a minimum allowance of leave for research students. At the moment it stands at up to eight weeks but this could potentially be none at all. I suggested a minimum of four weeks of leave for all students.

As part of this campaign, I have been working with Ms. Kerri Gardener (Head of Graduate Student Administration, University of Cambridge), Ms. Gemma Long (Head of Education Quality and Policy Team, University of Cambridge) and Ms. Alice Benton (Head of Education Services, University of Cambridge).

I have also been looking working with the Education and Policy Team and Chad Allen (GU President, 2015-2017) of the Registry on developing online resources to help supplement the awareness building exercise of the rights and welfare of our students. Recently I met with Dr. Meg Tait (Head, Cambridge Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of Cambridge) to discuss the possibilities of training and skill development for supervisees as well as supervisors, and this shall be followed up closely to see if it can be improved, as part of our sustained campaign and collaboration with CCTL and the Education and Policy Team of the University.

### **Housing and Living Expenses**

I have discussed with Trinity Hall and Darwin college student representatives regarding starting college-based campaigns for housing and living expenses, using the Housing and Living Expenses toolkit that I developed earlier in the year. We have also heard from the Office of Intercollegiate Service about the continued efforts to promote transparency by colleges when it comes to information on housing and living expenses in colleges.

### **Departmental Welfare**

It has been seen in the Collegiate University that postgraduate students are more closely related to their departments than their colleges. As a result, welfare support and advice in departments is of utmost importance. To look at the nuances and possibilities on this front, I have initiated discussions with some departments, particularly Physics (with Dr. Chris Haniff, Director of Graduate Education & Deputy Head of Department, Cavendish Laboratory), to look into graduate welfare representation and support. We hope that this discussion, among others, will yield some idea about how to approach this, based on student consultation and welfare requirements.

## **Race Equality and Diversity**

I met with Dr. Joanna Jasiewicz (Equality and Diversity Consultant, University of Cambridge) to discuss about the Race Equality Charter plan. Under this plan, the broad avenues of work include designing ways to ensure that university institutions have an account for racial diversity and equality in staff balance, recruitment and academic promotions, providing training sessions to college Discrimination and Harassment contacts, allocating funds for promoting and working on race equality by the university, encouraging BAME students to apply for courses, looking at ways to increase scholarships for students from under-represented ethnic minorities, making university webpages and resources more inclusive in content and presentation, promoting BAME role models, building awareness on complaint procedures for racial harassment and bullying, and organizing induction sessions on race equality and diversity.

We shall be working very closely with the Equality and Diversity team of the University of Cambridge on this project, particularly on topics that relate to our members. I have given specific suggestions to the team through Dr. Jasiewicz, particularly on unconscious bias and how to reduce its occurrence in the Collegiate University. In the next term, I look forward to launching CREATE (Campaign for Race Equality and Training for Education) with the GU BME Officer to look at these more closely, in terms of campaigning, sensitization programmes and awareness-building.

In this term, I have looked at organizing discussion groups and movie-screenings with our GU BME Officer Onyinye. We shall be looking at other aspects of widening participation of students from ethnically under-represented groups in the next term.

## **Updates from Executive Committee**

*Elly, International Officer:* She has been working on reducing the time required to allocate CAS numbers by the university to international students. She has also been looking at postgraduate funding. This is also broadly associated, under the topic of student finances, with a recent initiative that I undertook to see where the international student fee is used and whether it can be reduced.

*Fred, Environment Officer:* She has been looking at movie-screenings based on environmental and ethical issues-based topics, besides engaging with CUSU Ethical Affairs team and organizing a Magdalen College Swap as part of her remit.

*Alessandro, LGBTQ Officer:* He has been working on the organization of the first Pride event in the University on 8 June 2019. As GU, we have committed to provide a donation of £500, which was followed by the generous donation of the University of Cambridge of £2,500. I believe that there was a clear scope for the University of Cambridge and for the Graduate Union to support the first LGBTQ event in Cambridge. This event will have an impact on the broader student community, it will contribute to build solidarity and unity across the City and the University, and it will also help tackle issues of inequality and discrimination

## ***Projects and Initiatives from January – May 2019***

## **Engagement**

The Graduate Union (GU) is the University-wide representative body for postgraduate and mature undergraduate students at the University of Cambridge, and is one of the only students' unions in the UK that works exclusively with graduate students. Engagement with our membership is crucial to our work. However,

engagement of postgraduate students and mature undergraduate students with the Graduate Union is still limited. For instance, in the recent presidential election of the Union, 1111 students voted. This was around the 10% mark of our membership. We have had significant interest by our members for our events and campaigns, but it can be better.

To address this key issue, we have been working on an engagement strategy. As part of our new engagement policy, I initiated engagement drop-in sessions and covered the following places around the University. We got a very encouraging response from, and interaction with, students on topics varying from Brexit, housing and living expenses and welfare to academic welfare and divestment. Elections were an important period for engagement for the Union with our members, MCRs, Faculty Reps and campaign-groups. Our weekly bulletins have also helped in engagement and have received direct responses from members of the Graduate Union on topics varying from the Student Support Initiative to international student concerns. I have also joined college MCRs in their executive committee meetings to engage with the committees. I have done this in colleges such as Trinity Hall recently.

- Drop-in engagement sessions in colleges and faculties across the University.
- Attending MCR committee meetings and working closely with MCR committees.
- Using the bulletin to effectively communicate with our membership.
- Working with faculty representatives to engage postgraduate and mature undergraduate students.

## **Welfare**

### ***Housing and Living Expenses Campaign:***

- In Cambridge, postgraduate housing has not been given as much attention as undergraduate housing.
- As per the NUS-Unipol Accommodation Survey 2018, the overall average weekly rent stands at £147 in 2018-19, with the average annual rent being £6,366, across university and private housing providers.
- In the recent Cambridge Barometer survey, postgraduate students were not too happy about the cost of living (69%) and the cost of accommodation (67%) in the university.
- The Big Cambridge Survey 2018 gave similar results. 45% of postgraduate students believed that they got their value for money while 41% postgraduate students did not with regards to accommodation provided to them by either their college or the University in Cambridge. 64% felt that they were satisfied with the quality of their accommodation while 27% did not.

In the beginning of this term, I initiated a GU campaign on housing and living expenses. We obtained an early win in the *Phased Deposit scheme* for private providers who advertise with the University Accommodation Centre to distribute the deposit for a room over three months instead of having it upfront. In the last few months, we have engaged with college MCRs to see ways in which we build college-based campaigns on housing and living expenses. We have also been lobbying for transparency in housing and living expenses by informing prospective students seeking affiliation with a college the following key questions: number and kinds of rooms available, rent range, system of allocation of rooms, and miscellaneous (or Hidden) charges. I also proposed the Housing and Living Expenses motion in GU council, which was recently passed.

- Development and distribution of the housing toolkit to all MCRs across the collegiate university. This has helped initiate the discussion on college-based campaigns, with interactions having happened with MCR committee members of Trinity Hall and Girton College.
- Lobbying for greater transparency in housing and living expenses by colleges. We are working with the Office of Intercollegiate Services on this.

- Developed and proposed the Housing and Living Expenses policy in GU Council, which was unanimously passed.

### ***Sustaining the Graduate Rights Campaign***

- According to a Nature survey in 2017, for 67% of PhD students, the highly competitive research work surrounded by toxic and abusive supervision culture turned their research life into a nightmare, leading to loss of faith in academia and mental health problems, from chronic anxiety to clinical depression.
- As per our interactions with our members, there is still work to be done on highlighting the rights and responsibilities of research students in the University.
- As per our interactions with our members, the Code of Practice could do with some changes, particularly around annual leave and provisions for supervisor-supervisee relationships.

To help address these issues, we launched the Graduate Rights campaign last year and got an early win with the sign-up page to the Code of Practice. This year we are not only sustaining the campaign but also expanding it.

- Working on workshops on supervisor-supervisee relationships, managing time and tackling workspace stress and anxiety.
- Initiated discussion on workshops and modules for making our members aware of their rights.
- Working with the Education and Policy Team and Chad Allen (GU President, 2015-2017) of the Registry on developing online resources to help supplement the awareness building exercise of the rights and welfare of our students.
- Developed and proposed the policy motion for fair pay and opportunities for teaching and research responsibilities of postgraduate and mature undergraduate students.
- As a follow up on the policy on fair pay and support for research and teaching opportunities (that I proposed and which was passed in GU council) in the Collegiate University, the Graduate Union, along with the Cambridge UCU, is calling on the University and Colleges to *Raise the Bar* for all workers on casual or temporary contracts. We demand decent contracts, fair pay, rights at work for TES workers and international staff, respect for grad workers and fair allocation of teaching.
- Working on suggestions for changes in the Code of Practice for research students in the Collegiate University.
- We recently released the Personal Welfare Handbook for students that I have developed. The Handbook has got positive feedback from students across the University. The document is primarily for signposting to relevant welfare and access support for various issues and topics for postgraduate and mature undergraduate students.

### **Executive Committee Reforms**

I have tried to look at ways to empower the executive committee to be able to sustain their campaigns with the introduction of *Working Groups* for each officer. These working groups comprise of 3-5 members and help in research, campaigning and intervention.

Intersectionality has been another area that I have been interested in, and this year I have worked to establish an *Intersectionality Forum* for the liberation officers of the Graduate Union. This is to promote intersectionality in representation of the various identities of students in the Collegiate University.