

Imperial College Union

**THE FUTURE OF THE DEPUTY
PRESIDENT (GRADUATE STUDENTS) ROLE**

February 2007

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to open a debate on the future of the Deputy President for Graduate Students (DPGS) Role. This role has existed for around 18 months and is presently occupied by Ms. Shama Rahman.

Last year Simon Matthews and Alex Guite reviewed the structure of the Graduate Students' Association (GSA) and produced a substantial report. Almost all of the reforms proposed in this report were implemented although some were lost due to administrative transgressions during the handover period.

From the outset one point must be emphasised; the Union is committed to the development of a successful Graduate Student Association at Imperial College and this report does not seek to radically interfere with the current structure of the GSA. That said, any changes to the leading roles within the association, such as those that are proposed in this paper, may have a limited impact on the current structure of the GSA.

Brief History

The DPGS role was created in the summer of 2005 in response to recommendations that emerged from the College's 2005 Quality Assurance Agency Audit. It was argued at the time that whilst undergraduate representation was regarded to be adequate, postgraduate representation was relatively weak. There were pockets of success in some faculty unions and the postgraduate society. However, there was a distinct lack of co-ordination and evidence that many postgraduates had no representation whatsoever.

Building on past successes of the quasi-federal structure of Imperial College Union, a new constituent union, known as the Graduate Students' Association, was created to bring all postgraduate social and representation activities under one banner. Thanks to considerable resources provided by the College, the opportunity arose to create a Sabbatical Officer to lead this new constituent Union.

At that point a key decision was made that appears to have backfired. Instead of creating a nominal sabbatical "President" of the GSA, similar to the ICSMSU (Medics' Union) President, it was decided that the head of the GSA should have the status of "Deputy President". Hence the Deputy President for Graduate Students' role was created. This holder of this role was granted a

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vote on all Senior Union Committees and a seat on the College's Senate and Graduate Schools Committees.

Thus far this position has been occupied by two people; Mr Lui Huis in the first year and Ms Shama Rahman in the second. After a quiet start, the GSA has raised its profile throughout this year by organising several successful events. However, over the last 18 months it has become clear that several structural problems remain and require discussion and resolution.

Problems with the current model

Over recent months several key problems have been highlighted with the present arrangement.

As the DPGS position is a sabbatical position, it is almost impossible for a PhD student to hold this office. It is notoriously difficult to for any research student to take a full year sabbatical at any time during a PhD course. This effectively rules out half of the GSA constituents from leading their own Union. Furthermore, Masters students tend to be less experienced in the workings of the College and wider Union, partly because they often arrive from outside Imperial, leading to a difficult first few months of office. It also makes it harder for the Union to represent research students at a high level throughout the College.

Although Masters students stand a better chance than research students of being able to take a sabbatical to fulfil the role of DPGS, it is extremely difficult for any Masters student to work for the Union during the transitional period from July to September due to a 12-month course and thesis hand-in. This is a critical time for the Union during which all incoming sabbatical officers receive intensive handover training and team building exercises. Both Shama and Lui were unable to work for the Union for more than one day a week (on average) during this period.

It is therefore unsurprising that the DPGS who has, for understandable reasons, been absent from the Union for most of the summer, would find it hard to integrate with the other four Sabbatical Officers and would be less equipped with skills, experiences and knowledge to fulfil his or her role. It is also very hard for the other sabbatical officers who are also learning and are very busy themselves, to help the DPGS during the critical and busy freshers' term.

The fact that the holder of the DPGS position is a fully paid sabbatical officer has drawn considerable attention from student media and senior volunteer officers. Any experienced and seasoned political heavy-weight would find this level of scrutiny challenging; to a less experienced officer such a scenario must be demoralising. Constant political pressure and criticism tends to reduce morale, which in turn reduces performance generating further public criticism. This vicious cycle seems to be spiralling out of control at the moment and if the GSA is to succeed then it must be broken.

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On February 8th the Executive directed the President and current DPGS to develop a selection of models that could be implemented to address the problems highlighted above. To this end three models have been suggested. All three suggest that the DPGS role should be abolished and replaced with a GSA Chair.

Financial Matters

Before describing these models in detail, one fact must be made clear. The College has allocated around £28K to Imperial College Union specifically to improve Postgraduate representation and support. This money is effectively ring-fenced and any moves to reallocate it to other sections of ICU are likely to be met with disquiet from senior college figures.

That is not to say that the way in which this funding is allocated cannot change and the appendix shows how each of the four models described below would allocate this £28K. In addition, how much money is freed up for activities should not be deciding factors for any model as money can always be applied for from other avenues (e.g. Graduate Schools, the Roberts Funding, sponsors, etc)

Model #1: Full time sabbatical GSA President

This model is the least radical and attempts to build on the successes of a full time Graduate Students sabbatical position.

Under this model

1. The DPGS position would remain but lose its Deputy President status and be known as GSA Chair.
2. The GSA Chair would work full-time and enjoy a similar status to other non-Central Union sabbatical officers such as the Medic President.
3. In recognising that the role of the GSA Chair is still likely to be held by a recent Masters graduate, it is proposed that a GSA Vice-Chair is established that could only be occupied by PhD students. This arrangement is more amenable to PhD students' routines and it is hoped that this will ensure that PhD students are adequately represented at higher levels of the GSA and College.
4. Despite elections being held in summer term, this part-time Vice-chair would start in the summer and the GSA chair will start in September. Therefore they can bring the chair up to speed with any handover and team dynamics. If funds permit, a nominal honorarium could be paid to the holder of this position over the summer as is paid to the C&G president.
5. All other posts and structures within the GSA would remain unchanged.

Model #2: Part time paid officers

This model effectively splits the responsibility of the DPGS into three part time paid positions.

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Under this model

1. The DPGS position would be abolished and replaced with GSA Chair
2. The GSA Chair would become a part time paid role that any PhD or Masters student would be able to hold during their studies.
3. The GSA Chair would be supported by two Vice Chairs, one for Taught PG students and the other for research student, who would also be paid at a slightly lower rate. These Vice Chairs would take on a lot of the committee work that is currently undertaken by the DPGS.
4. Technically the paid officers would be salaried for a nominal six hour week to satisfy College regulations, but it is accepted that they may need to put more hours in at times.
5. The treasurer, activities co-ordinator, welfare officer and secretary would remain as unpaid volunteer positions.
6. Funds released by the abolition of a full time sabbatical role could be reassigned to:
 - a. An increased activities budget
 - b. A contribution towards a staff member to support the GSA.
7. Elections for the Taught Vice Chair would take place in the autumn term of the year they start i.e. October as soon as they come to College and elections for the Chair and Research Vice Chair would be held in the summer term, so they will start immediately.

Model #3: Volunteer officers with full staff support

This model attempts to tackle the political disquiet that “paying volunteers” may generate by transferring the DPGS salary to a staff member, rather than paid volunteers. This model has been developed by Bristol University Student Union and a delegation from ICU plans to visit Bristol in March.

Under this model:

1. The DPGS position would be abolished and replaced with an unpaid volunteer GSA Chair.
2. The GSA Chair could be supported by six Vice Chairs who would take on a lot of the committee work that is currently undertaken by the DPGS. However, unlike model two, these officers would not be paid.
3. All elections save the Activities Vice-Chair would take place in the autumn term with duties being upheld immediately with corresponding handover occurring. It seems inevitable that the Activities Vice-Chair would most probably be a PhD student. This is unavoidable as most MScs will be far too busy writing up theses in the summer will have left the college before the October elections are held. All other positions could be held by any postgraduate student.
4. The funds released by the abolition of the DPGS role would be used to employ a full time member of support staff.
5. This staff member would perform a support and administration role and facilitate communication between the volunteer unpaid GSA officers. They would also offer general support for Events and work to ensure that handovers are successful and training for new officers is delivered.
6. This Staff member could double as a “Representation” staff where they would be responsible for ensuring that all representative positions are

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elected as this is a major drawback of the Union. This would encourage greater and more enthusiastic involvement with the Union. Representation is especially hard for graduate students (e.g. the Faculty of Medicine is spread over five campuses), so the staff member would still be primarily working for the GSA. However, as a secondary role, they would also be assisting Faculty Unions in both their work for postgraduates and representation as a whole.

7. This new staff member would complement and support the work of the DPEW, Faculty Union Presidents and GSA Chair in a way that other student services staff support the work of CSC and club officers.
8. This Staff member could be held to account through conventional performance management rather than through debate in Union Council or student media.
9. The GSA activities budget could be increased but to a lesser extent than in model two (see appendix for precise amounts).

Model 4: Status Quo

It could be argued that there have been no major shortcomings with the actual outputs of the GSA under the current system and it seems appropriate that a “status quo” option should be presented alongside these other models. This model stems from the argument that the GSA is working well and can only improve. However, this does not address the timing of election concerns highlighted earlier in this report.

Advantages and disadvantages of each model

The table below summarises the arguments that have been presented in favour and against each model so far:

Model	Advantages	Disadvantages
#1	<p>Maintains a full time sabbatical for Graduate Students – this is helpful for casework etc. At least 40 hours work per week needed.</p> <p>The GSA Chair would feel less isolated with the support of a Vice Chair.</p> <p>Creates a powerful role that research students (PhD Vice Chair) could occupy.</p> <p>The PhD vice-chair will provide support in terms of experience and continuity. Student network through friends will help GSA brand and reach</p> <p>The PhD Vice-Chair will start in the summer term and can be the bridge between the Chair (starting in September) and the team of</p>	<p>Leaves no money for staff support.</p> <p>PhD students would not be able to become GSA Chair.</p> <p>The GSA Chair role is likely to remain high profile and open to attack. However, the level of scrutiny is likely to be far less than a Central Union Sabbatical.</p> <p>In effect there would be two handovers (one in summer one in autumn), which is complicated.</p>

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	<p>Sabbaticals in terms of handover and communication.</p> <p>The retention of a full time role maintains the profile and accountability of the GSA.</p> <p>This model offers the least amount of structural change and will allow the GSA to settle in to its new found structure without subjecting it to more re-haul and confusion.</p>	
#2	<p>Releases approx. £7K for GSA Activities and part time officer pay.</p> <p>Reduces the political scrutiny that a full time sabbatical is subjected to.</p> <p>Allows PhD students to become chair. These students tend to be more experienced than masters students, which could improve performance.</p> <p>The honorarium received by the Vice Chair would be comparable to a Faculty Union volunteer officer.</p> <p>Paid officers can be held to account better than volunteer officers.</p> <p>Paid officers (if PhD) might be better able to convince supervisors of their commitment to the GSA than non-paid volunteers</p>	<p>Communication between the Chair and Vice Chairs must be exemplary for this model to work.</p> <p>Staff member will only be devoting part of their time to organising GSA affairs and co-ordinating between Chair and Vice-Chairs. Everyone's hours put together will result in less than 40 hours a week (18 hours per week on average for the student volunteers and however much the staff member can spare).</p> <p>Masters students would not be able to become GSA Chair.</p> <p>It could be a difficult job for the Vice-president (Taught students) as the elections will be in October as soon as they come to Imperial-lack of working knowledge of Imperial and ICU.</p> <p>Would PhD students really be able to dedicate mandatory hours overcoming supervisor adversity? People are already struggling to be the unpaid volunteer GSA treasurer due to workload for example.</p>
#3	<p>Releases approx. £5K for GSA Activities</p> <p>Politically more acceptable to volunteer officers, the bulk of which form the Union Council.</p> <p>A full time dedicated staff member provides continuity and line management accountability.</p> <p>Faculty Unions, which presently</p>	<p>The profile of the GSA Chair may be significantly reduced.</p> <p>The staff member may end up playing too much of a leadership role, undermining the GSA Chair.</p> <p>Nottingham looked at all the models available and decided our option of a student leading post-graduate affairs as opposed to a staff member was the best model.</p>

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	<p>receive very little staff support, could benefit from this support. But equally, a GSA chair should be able to help them with any queries regarding postgraduates.</p> <p>Re-titling positions under the GSA Chair, as "Vice-Chairs" would appeal to the Postgraduate body.</p> <p>One Chair and six Vice-chairs will create a great team with all Vice-chairs taking their roles more seriously and with greater responsibility.</p>	<p>If the volunteers are not working, the Staff member may have less motivation than a paid elected student to drive the team back to efficiency.</p>
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Brand

During this debate it has been suggested that the GSA brand should be abandoned and re-launched as the Postgraduate Student Union. The benefits of this move are that due to recent intense political scrutiny, the GSA brand has been devalued. One counter-argument could be that it has taken two years to establish a brand that is now recognisable amongst the postgraduate student community and to abandon it at this stage could be seen as a retrograde step. In addition, despite the recent bad press regarding the DPGS role, it was quite clear that the roles of the GSA Chair and the DP were separate and it did not seem to tarnish the GSA brand itself.

Other matters

It is suggested that the GSA Chair, in whatever form, should retain his or her position on the ICU Council, ICU Executive Committee and ICU Representation and Welfare Board, but not the Clubs and Societies Board as the GSA does not run any clubs. It is further suggested that the DPGS Office should be converted into the GSA Office should any of the models be adopted. It is proposed that this office would be equipped with least two computers and should be accessible to all senior GSA officers.

The next step

A full consultation is required and the following three interest groups must be approached for their views on this matter:

1. The Graduate community of Imperial College,
2. Senior Union volunteer officers, particularly those on Council and those whose role will be to support this initiative,
3. Senior College figures, particularly those who provided funding for the establishment of the DPGS role.

**Imperial College Union
Future of the DPGS Discussion Paper
Appendix (Finances)**

MODEL 1

Item	Pay per hour	Hours per week	Weeks	Actual total
President Costs*				£ 25,000.00
Vice President (Research Students)	£ 6.50	3	52	£ 1,014.00
Staffing Support				£ -
Remaining activities budget				£ 1,000.00
Total				£ 27,014.00

MODEL 2

Item	Pay per hour	Hours per week	Weeks	Actual total
President Salary	£ 16.00	6	52	£ 4,992.00
Vice President (Taught Students)	£ 12.00	6	52	£ 3,744.00
Vice President (Research Students)	£ 12.00	6	52	£ 3,744.00
Staffing Support				£ 12,500.00
Remaining activities budget				£ 2,000.00
Total				£ 26,980.00

MODEL 3

Item	Pay per hour	Hours per week	Weeks	Actual total
President Salary				£ -
Vice President (Taught Students)				£ -
Vice President (Research Students)				£ -
Staffing Support				£ 25,000.00
Remaining activities budget				£ 2,000.00
Total				£ 27,000.00

MODEL 4

Item	Pay per hour	Hours per week	Weeks	Actual total
DPGS Costs*				£ 25,000.00
GSA Activities Budget				£ 2,000.00
Total				£ 27,000.00