

Imperial College Union

**A DISCUSSION ON THE FUTURE OF THE DEPUTY
PRESIDENT (GRADUATE STUDENTS) ROLE**

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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 errors 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 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. The holder of this role was also granted a 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 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 (partly because they often arrive from outside Imperial) tend to be less experienced in the workings of the College and wider Union, leading to a difficult first few months of office.

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 "fresher's" 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.

Proposal

All of the problems described above seem to be inextricably linked to the Sabbatical nature of the DPGS role. If the DPGS were a part time position

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then we suggest that the level of political scrutiny would be reduced to that of a CSC Chair or Faculty Union President. Over recent years very few Faculty Union Presidents or CSC chairs have faced the level of criticism (rightly or wrongly) that the DPGS has had to deal with in recent months.

If the DPGS role were to be reduced to a paid part time volunteer officer position it would take on a similar role to that of a Faculty Union President and we suggest that the position's title should be changed to "GSA President".

One immediate benefit of this move is that it would open up the possibility of research students holding this position at the same time as conducting research. It has been pointed out, however, that it would be harder for Masters Students to occupy this position if it were elected towards the end of the academic year. Further discussion around the timing of elections is clearly needed.

The distinction between a taught postgraduate student and a research postgraduate student needs to be recognised and it is proposed that two Vice Presidential roles, one for research students and the other for taught students, should be created to support the President. The Vice President for Research would be elected at the same time as the President if we chose to elect the President at the end of the academic year. The Vice President for Taught Students would have to be elected each October. The roles of these Vice Presidents would encompass both the academic representation and social co-ordination remits that are undertaken by the President. It is suggested that for certain Graduate School meetings, the responsibility can be shared out amongst the VPs such that the Masters VP can go to the GSLSM/GSEPS Postgraduate Quality Committee (only discusses MSc courses anyway) and the PhD VP can go to the GSLSM/GSEPS Academic Training Committee (mainly discusses transferable skills).

We suggest most other positions on the GSA Executive (Activities Co-ordinator, Welfare Officer, Treasurer, Publicity Officer) are retained.

In addition, in order to co-ordinate three part-time positions and to provide some continuity and expertise on PG issues (as these part-time officers might potentially face a difficult handover otherwise), it is proposed we examine the Cardiff and Bristol model and look at providing more staff member for the GSA, possibly in the form of a "PG administrator".

Finances

Presently the GSA receives a small level of funding for activities and a considerable level of funding for the sabbatical position. If the sabbatical position were to be abolished then a substantial amount of funding could be released for other activities.

Although the Presidential and Vice Presidential roles described above would essentially be volunteer roles, it is suggested that they could be paid a similar level to a Graduate Teaching Assistant (with the President possibly being paid

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more as he or she might be expected to put more time in to this position). Any remaining funding should be set aside for GSA events and staff resources.

A suggested breakdown of the finances of the GSA under the new model is summarised in the Appendix.

College's Support and Students' Views

So far this proposal has only been discussed with Professor Mary Ritter who was broadly supportive of this move. Clearly, further consultation with key figures in the College is required. Incidentally, it has been suggested that the President and Vice Presidents could collect credits for transferable skills courses; however, this idea needs further development before it can be proposed to the relevant college committee.

The next step is to consult the graduate community before putting a concrete proposal to the Union Council. If we chose to change abolish the DPGS role then this would require approval by the College Council, which next meets on March 23rd.

SR & JC 07/02/07

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

OLD MODEL

Current DPGS Costs	£	26,562.00
Current funding	£	2,000.00
Total	£	28,562.00

NEW MODEL

Item	Pay per hour	Hours per week	Weeks	Sub total	Fudge Factor	Actual total
President Salary	£ 15.00	6	52	£ 4,680.00	1.33	£ 6,224.40
Vice President (Taught Students)	£ 10.00	6	52	£ 3,120.00	1.33	£ 4,149.60
Vice President (Research Students)	£ 10.00	6	52	£ 3,120.00	1.33	£ 4,149.60
Student services						£ 7,000.00
Remaining activities budget						£ 7,000.00
Total						£ 28,523.60