



Gift Sotonye-Frank  
Postgraduate Students Officer

ANNUAL BUSINESS REPORT  
2019/20  
Queens University Belfast Students Union

# ANNUAL BUSINESS REPORT

## Introduction

It has been a great pleasure to have worked tirelessly this year as your postgraduate student officer. My first day on the job will remain forever memorable. Indeed, it was the day I was being awarded the prestigious title of Student of the Year 2019 here at Queens. Surrounded by my family, I felt really excited and supported to lead in my role as postgraduate student officer. I therefore bring you this report of the major areas of work I have been doing and some of my achievements.



## Supporting PGs During COVID-19 Pandemic

The impact of COVID-19 has had a multifaceted impact on our PG community. I have therefore in the recent months and days since the virus outbreak. In particular, I have dealt with students queries received through email, video and telephone calls.

Also, as part of my role representing PGR students during COVID-19, a survey was sent out to PGRs students to provide information on the impact of COVID-19 on their studies. That survey was analysed and the report sent to the Senior management of the Queens. Several meetings with Senior Management have been scheduled to discuss the report and I will provide further updates on the progress of implementation of the recommendations made in my report.

## 24 hours Study Spaces

I identified the challenges faced by our postgraduate students in the summer months of dissertation writing, particularly regarding the lack of study spaces as well as the lack of access to buildings after certain hours of the night. Consequently, I lobbied both the Graduate School and the University to increase access to study spaces. After a pilot exercise that extended opening hours last summer, it became more obvious that there is a demand for extended opening hours.

I am pleased to state that approval has now been granted by the university to extend opening hours of the Graduate school as well as an extended opening hour in the Library during the summer months so that postgraduate students can utilise these services during their dissertation writing for 4 weeks in the month of August and September. This means that postgraduate students writing their dissertation no longer have to worry about the lack of accessible study spaces as going forward beyond COVID-19 and social distancing postgraduates students writing their dissertation will be able to work flexibly and with confidence knowing that opening times are extended and buildings are more accessible in the period of these extended opening hours.

## **Welcome Week and Postgraduate Fair**

Welcome Week and Postgraduate fair was a great way to welcome new and returning PG students at the start of the academic year. It was a chance to meet and greet very informally new students to QUB. In particular the Postgraduate Fair held in the Graduate School provided an opportunity for many postgraduate students to stop and chat with me at the QUBSU stall at the Graduate school. It was a very well attended event organised by the Graduate School.

## **Postgraduate Representation**

In order to increase postgraduate students' academic representation, a new position for postgraduate school representative was created. In order for this to happen, I brought a motion before the Students Council seeking a constitutional amendment that will allow for the creation of this position. This motion passed and in the new academic year there will be PG school reps elected to fill in this position in all the schools.

Prior to achieving the creation of PG school reps, it was still necessary to have an increased number of PG representation in the university. To this extent, to increase postgraduate students' representation, I worked with the education officer and the Graduate school to create the possibility of electing postgraduate students as PG Forum reps during the rep elections.

I am pleased to announce that with the creation of the PG forum reps, one from each school, PG representation increased significantly both at PG forum and academic representation in schools.

## **Postgraduate representative Training**

In partnership with the Education officer and the Graduate school, for the first time, PG reps received a bespoke training tailored for their need as postgraduate with particular elements of that training focusing on leadership and leadership styles. It was a very rewarding training as I was part of the team that also delivered the training.

Furthermore, periodic monthly catch up and networking sessions were organised as a support mechanism. The sessions also provided opportunities for short talks, exchange of ideas and identification of areas that need strengthening and require additional support to enable PG reps get their message across to their schools.



## **QUBSU Parents and Carers Network (PCN)**

During the first semester, I was able to work with the PCN by organising a monthly meet up. This was a great opportunity to chat and hear from university staff who attended and gave talks, the services that this student cohort can access for support. For example, a member of the library and another from Queens Accommodation were in attendance on separate occasions to provide information that was relevant to this group of students which was rewarding.

During COVID-19 outbreak, I was able to give support to the PCN members on how to access laptops to aid them study more effectively rather than be distracted by the impact of home schooling children and sharing laptops with their children.

The challenge however has been that activities of the network is mainly facilitated or organised by the postgraduate student officer but would have been better to have members of the network organise it themselves but with little support from the postgraduate student officer .

### **Student-Supervisor Relationship**

A partnership project between the QUBSU led by postgraduate student officer and the Graduate School led by Kara Bailie was developed on the subject of the Student supervisor relationship. As part of this partnership with the Graduate School, a workshop and a conference were planned. The workshop was held in January with over 50 participants in attendance made up of PhD students and academics. The conference initially planned to hold in the month of May 2020, was cancelled due to the COVID-19 pandemic and lock down regulation. Nevertheless, a webinar has now been planned for the same purpose to take place during Research Culture week in the first week in June. During the Research Culture week, the Supervisor-Student Relationship toolkit which I and a group of postgraduate students have developed will also be launched.

In addition, I have worked closely with QSIS team to improve the interface for recording and/or uploading students record of supervision. This improvement is designed for PGs to have a more user-friendly experience in uploading their record of supervision.



### **National Students' Union Campaign**

This year I have worked closely with and also been involved in projects with the USI postgraduate officer, Sara Dowling and the USI Academic affairs officer, Kevin McStravock to ensure that postgraduate students' welfare remains a priority across the universities in the island of Ireland. Some of the activities included meeting with other postgraduate officers and students during the SUT+ training held at Ulster University in Jordan's town.

I continue to work closely with the USI postgraduate officer to ensure that postgraduate's welfare remains a priority. Universities. As a member of the postgraduate Working Group, I have been involved through telephone conversations and through online platforms in discussions around postgraduate Working Rights Charter. Information about this can be found [here](#)

In January, I invited president, Robert postgraduate officer, speakers to join in



both the NUS-USI Murtagh and the USI Sara Dowling as guest 'Run for Something'

event on the 27<sup>th</sup> of January as part of events in the run up to the QUBSU elections.

I have worked closely with NUS-USI on different campaigns particularly the campaign on “No to Tuition Fee Increase”. More recently, I have joined in several meetings on line to discuss issues of the impact of COVID-19 on the student population and specifically the postgraduate students

### **AHSS Social Space**

As a member of the AHSS staff student experience group, I have been working closely with the dean and some staff of AHSS in partnership with QUB Estates to provide a bespoke social space for both undergrads and postgrads of the AHSS faculty. Funding has been secured for this project and we are working towards progressing the project to the next level and making it ready and available in due time for students.

### **QUBSU and Graduate School Partnership**

Excellent working relationship has been established with the Graduate School I have enjoyed extremely high support from all staff of the Graduate School and our partnership projects have continued to make progress as a result of these excellent working relationship.

Some significant support that I have received include

- Established office space for each week (varied across September then in Group Room 7 on Tuesday each week)
- QUBSU Branding visible across Graduate School all year around – plasmas, notice boards, study space and magazine stand
- Social Media created for collaborative promotion of events related to PG students
- Planned the tri-annual PG Forum
- Planned several activities for PG engagement including , ‘Run for Something’, ‘Student-Supervisor relationship workshop, and conference.
- PG rep networking events
- Regular meeting with Kara Bailey (Graduate School Manager) and Margret Topping (Dean of Graduate School) -

### **PG Student Engagement with QUBSU**

Creating a PG student working group was a useful strategy to increase engagement with PG community with activities of the QUBSU. Therefore, while this PGs working group were involved planning and supporting events organised by me, it created even greater interaction with other sabbatical officers, and also allowed these students to explore the QUBSU building which for some was a first time. More importantly it helped them understand some of the work QUBSU does to support PG students.

### **PG Weekly Update**

Every week I send out a weekly update which is hosted on the Graduate School weekly update website. To date I have written over forty weekly updates which students have

found useful. In addition I have also periodically sent an all PGs email on issues that are relevant to them. You can check out these updates at [here](#). The interesting bit for me about the weekly update is that it showcases one postgraduate student each week and the research that they are each undertaking as well as the interesting opportunities they are involved in both at QUB and beyond.

## **UCU Strikes and QUBSU**

QUBSU stood in solidarity with the University College Union (UCU) during periods of industrial action first for 8 days in the period between the 25<sup>th</sup> of November to 4<sup>th</sup> of December, and again for 14 days from the period between 20<sup>th</sup> February to 14<sup>th</sup> March.

During the industrial action, I joined other sabbatical officers and students to stand in solidarity with UCU members. This was important and particularly relevant as I stood to advocate for our postgraduate students on the issue of casualisation.



## **Weekly Officer Sweeps (Sabbatical officers Team Time)**

Every Monday at 10am-11am, I have met with the other officers in the team. This is a recurrent meeting where each sabbatical officer gets a chance to talk to the team about the projects they are working on and the ways in which each officer may require support from other officers in this team. It is a forum for weekly updating each member of the priorities for the week by the president. On some occasions it has been rescheduled as meeting on the Monday was impractical.

## **PG Drop in Session**

My drop in session runs every week from 2pm-4pm every Tuesday at the Graduate school Group Room 7. The sessions have gone very well as PGs have found it to be a safe space to come in and have a chat about different issues.

## **Committees and Working Groups**

Below is a list of committees and Working groups I sit on. I have been in attendance in most meetings that have been called and always listening and contributing in ways that are beneficial to the study body but in particular to the postgraduate community that I represent always ensuring your interest is well presented, and protected.

- Academic Board
- Academic Council
- Collaborative Provision Group
- Courses and Regulations Group
- Education Committee
- Research and Postgraduate Committee

- Executive Management Committee
- Management Board
- MHLS Postgraduate Education Sub-Group
- Postgraduate Advisory Board
- Postgraduate Forum
- Student Partnership Project Group
- Supporting Student Attainment Action Group
- Internationalisation of the Curriculum
- CAPE AHSS Review Panel
- CAPE EPS Review Panel
- CAPE MHLS Review Panel

## Conclusion

As your postgraduate student officer, I have learned so much through doing so much in just one year, for example, as a leader, representative, campaigner, engaging with students, creating new projects, collaborating on new and existing projects and dealing with staff at all levels. I will cherish my experience and I know there is still work to be done but I also know that as a strong Union, QUBSU continues to play its role in supporting student life at Queens.

Thank you everyone for your support.

God bless,

Gift Sotonye-Frank

Postgraduate Student Officer

