student's transforming

postgraduate research student engagement with uea(su)

postgraduate**su**

contents

contextual information

Since the dissolution of the Graduate Students Association, uea(su) has had difficulties engaging postgraduate research students (PGR) within the democratic structure. In response to various informal reports of low engagement with PGR students, in 2018 Union Council passed policy with a mandate to explore this issue further. With support from the postgraduate education officer, and uea(su) staff the postgraduate committee undertook the research task of investigating the engagement levels of PGRs with uea(su) to identify areas where we can improve our engagement work with a focus on the democratic structure.

aims

We believe that every student we represent should feel able to engage in our processes, both democratic and non-democratic. For us to properly understand what barriers are in place for PGR students and how we should go about addressing these issues we needed to collect qualitative and quantitative data from and about these students.

Target Number One

To identify any barriers that make PGR engagement in uea(su) difficult for PGR students.

Target Number Two

To make recommendations of changes in the way uea(su) works and functions to address any barriers identified.

methodology

The postgraduate committee decided a quasi-thematic research method would be most effective for this study. The qualitative methods included the use of focus groups, and one to one interview to gain the qualitative data needed. For the quantitative data we used pre-generated engagement information available to uea(su) through the clubs and societies structures.

To gain the most diverse understanding we decided to be selective in the application process for the research. We aimed to engage at least 1 PGR student from each school of study (including Norwich Biological Institute – NBI). Moreover, the criteria for a successful applicant included whether they had engaged with uea(su) before and in what form this engagement occurred. Once these criteria were satisfied successful applicants were emailed with dates for focus groups or interviews (selected at random). This method certainly had its limitations. Given the nature of the research and the anecdotal understanding that PGR students have lower engagement we were unable to get students from some schools. Moreover, there were only a select few applicants who had no previous engagement. Therefore, we chose those who had the lowest amounts of engagement especially where the democratic structures were concerned.

Participants were shown the current democratic structure of the union in the form of an organisation structure after all focus group questions were asked. Follow up questions were asked after this reveal.

results

The findings can piece students' issues with engagement to 4 categories: Time, Democratic Structure, Location, and communication.

These issues do not operate in separate spheres but interact and affect one another. Therefore, it is important to note that separating them is purely for research purposes and ease of developing specific and measurable recommendations.

statistics

Below are some general statistics for student numbers at UEA in the 2018 – 2019 academic year, and sports clubs and societies at UEA showing the levels of PGT and PGR engagement within these.

Student Type	Numbers
UG	12,017 (71.5%)
PGT	2,673 (15.8%)
PGR	1,311 (7.7%)
Other	871 (5.1%)
Total	16,872

sports clubs

Student Type	2018*
UG	3085 (89.7%)
PGT	199 (5.8%)
PGR	72 (2.1%)
Other	83 (2.4%)
Total Members	3439

sports club committee members

Student Type	2018*
UG	432 (94.7%)
PGT	17 (3.8%)
PGR	7 (1.5%)
Total Members	456

societies

Student Type	2018*
UG	5737 (88.8%)
PGT	388 (6%)
PGR	84 (1.3%)
Other	252 (3.9%)
Total Members	6461

society committee members

Student Type	2018*
UG	1159 (93.7%)
PGT	40 (3.3%)
PGR	20 (1.6%)
Other	18 (1.4%)
Total Members	*1237*

The above statistics show there is no proportional representation of the membership of either sports teams or societies, this is also evident in the make-up of their committee members. We recognise the above numbers do not show the cause for low numbers from both PGT and PGR. However, both membership in general and of a committee are dominated by UG students, which as is observed from the qualitative research is one of the barriers to engagement for some PGR students.

key quotes

Below are some key quotes participants noted during focus groups and interviews. Quotes are separated into sections that were discussed in the structure of the research.

Perception of uea(su)

"The only thing I've found is that sometimes I'm not that informed about the people we're voting for, so quite often I won't vote because I don't really know who they are or what they're doing."

"I don't think we have that much to do with the SU really …. especially because I'm a PhD student at the NBI […] I feel like you kind of get forgotten a little bit by the SU ."

"Wednesday is sports day but I can't take half a day off work to go do the club or sport society like you would if you were an undergrad because we just can't do it. And there's a lot of things that the union run that is daytime, things like do something different week so they find it harder to include PhD students because we kind of have to do full time schedules."

"For us [at NRP] I think it's not representative at all as I think we're left out of the whole spectrum of… I mean we're technically UEA students, we don't feel like we are UEA students, we feel like a separate entity."

"I think it's more of a political thing than maybe people initially realise. Especially last year with the strikes and stuff like that. That's the first time I realised that the students' union can actually act against the university."

"I think we don't have enough information. Sometimes we don't receive enough e-mails maybe, and also because of the website sometimes I think it might not be updated or the accessibility is not very clear, it's not very friendly."

key quotes

"[There's] lack of clarity with what the SU does and how we can get involved. Also, there's not a lot of sense of change it's like this is the way things are done, this is the way things have been done.""I think that the SU is for undergraduate students, not for postgraduates sometimes."

"It serves as a point ofcommunication, a point of like getting different societies together and different groups."

What would a good system would look like?

"More regular voting for things like, not just like voting reps once a year or whatever, I think we should give postgrads students more options throughout the year cause obviously I know that supposedly the SU are coming up with a lot of schemes all the time and we never get the choice of whether we want these to go forward or not. If we're constantly being asked like, "do you want another therapy dog or do you want this other thing, we've got his money and we're gonna do something"then we can vote for it."

"Events being made more inclusive for everyone. More aware for everyone."

"I think the SU website needs to be changed. As it is, it's not very user-friendly. And – I may be wrong – but even on the website, on the PG part, I don't know who my representatives are, there's no picture. I don't know, maybe it could be more user-friendly."

What would a perfect system look like?

"Some kind of anonymous feedback that you can give on the website or something like that because if you want to claim now you need to go to the PGR office, they see us, get our name,they know our supervisor's name. So some kind of anonymous feedback that can then go to the faculty or UEA and then they can do something about it."

key quotes

"I think people just assume that because the information is out there somewhere then you can go and get it but realistically, we don't know it's there until we look for it. Whereas if you have someone to be like 'oh I'm promoting sports this week, do you play sports, what sports do you like, we have this we have that.'"

"A regular presentation/opportunity to meet with the people, open meetings, open groups that people would just go to and discuss, feedback, and yeah, different times,not all the time, maybe once a month."

"It's finding a safe space where you feel like you can 100% open up and just blurt out everything that's going on, without having the backlash of being a member of faculty that you're speaking about and then being like 'ah but I'm friends with that person', all that. I think that I would go and openly speak to people. That's how I'd do it."

Other

"I think accommodation is also an issue for postgrads. We don't have that much choice and it's very expensive considering our annual stipend to live on campus."

overall findings

Time

We already know PGR students are the most time poor on campus, between working towards their PhD, teaching, having a job, networking, writing conference papers and generally furthering their academic careers there is very little time to engage in democracy, so where they can and do, we need to make the most of it.

- Participants noted some of events taking place at the Union occur during the day, which is inconsistent with the hours of PGR students.
- Participants noted losing the capabilities to join clubs, societies etc when transitioning into PGR life.
- Participants noted before they can and want to engage in a democratic way, they want to be able to enjoy the fun engaging elements of the Union.

Democratic Structure

- Many participants did not know what the current uea(su) democratic structure looked like.
- They we're unaware of the people who held positions in this structure.
- Most participants understood that elections took place each year, however many did not understand what or who they were voting for and therefore did not vote.
- Specific students wanted more representation – NBI want a part-time position, so they can feel more part of the UEA experience. It is clear that students see the power in having representation at this level.
- The main conclusion from this section is that participants did not believe the structure represented their views, and when questioned further participants suggested having a new educational representational structure of:
  - Taught Degree Officer.
  - Research Degree Officer.

overall findings

- They want to see more active involvement from their officers in their degree,participants cite their UG experience to PG and the fall in officer involvement.
- Another suggestion is to rename the Postgraduate Education Officer Role as this does not resonate with PGR students, specifically the word education. Suggestions included Postgraduate Rights Officer, and Postgraduate Officer.
- Participants noted the elections period for postgraduates is at the wrong time, suggestions of late summer, or beginning of the academic year.
- The focus of discussion was almost universally around the PG Education officer. As there are three other FTO's who represent PG's we should look at how we heighten the presence of these part-time officers with PG's.

It should be noted that the proposed changes in officer structure are still defined by the current and with two sole positions for education. There were no occasions where participants discussed an officer team who are all mandated to focus on education, or any such other formation of an elected representative team.

Location

- The main issue sited by all participants from NBI was location and physical space, being too far away from the union/Activities.
- They want more of a physical presence from the SU around campus.
- Participants noted they would like to see all officers around campus more, and have specific regular drop in sessions for their constituents.
- All participants have noted wanted a mandatory walk around campus and Union house, even at the NBI.

overall findings

Communication

We already know that our communication leaves a lot to be desired, especially when it comes to our democratic activities.

- Participants wanted more regular email communication from the Union.
- They wanted more engaging and nuanced ways of communicating on a range of issues from candidates in elections, to more information about pg(su) events. (including polling on social media, vlogs, podcasts etc)
- They noted not knowing where to find information and then information not being clear as main drivers for a lack of knowledge in Union democracy.
- They mentioned the lack of clarity in what and who the SU is. Specifically wanting pictures of everyone who works there clearly identifiable on the site or physically in the office.
- They noted surveying students to find out the times and places they want to engage democratically would be beneficial.

considerations for the future

- Rebrand two officer roles: UG Education and PG Education to Taught Degrees Officer, and Research Degrees Officer.
- Create a PTO officer position: NBI Part Time Officer.
  - This person would sit on SOC and the Postgraduate Committee.
- Liaise with SU and UEA comms around having a pg specific newsletter from postgraduate(su).
- Move the Postgraduate election period to a more suitable time for this cohort of students.
- Liaise with the PGR service to implement a mandatory tour of UEA campus and SU building for new PGR starters.
- Re-define the democratic structure to make more sense and communicate this more effectively.
- Postgraduate Officer(s) to hold drop in sessions for students to ask them questions.
- Use social media as a tool to engage more people in sharing their thoughts and ideas for postgraduate(su).
- Survey students to find out where, and when they want to engage.
- The focus of discussion was almost universally around the PG Education officer. As there are three other FTO's who represent PG's we should look at how we heighten the presence of these PTO's with PG's.
- Evaluate the current uea(su) website making more of the postgraduate specific information more accessible, including events and sports club timings.