2019 ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING (AGM)
PRESIDENT'S REPORT

Elizabeth Olsen

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ACTIVITIES OF THE PGSA

Membership Engagement

PGSA membership stands at 1,627 as at 2nd October 2019, and increase of about 100 members from 1,515 as at 27th September 2018. The PGSA has built on the successful addition of social and membership events introduced in 2017 and 2018 and now has several reliably successful types of events. With the introduction of mailchimp we've improved communication and engagement with members. We need to build our social media profile to further engage with members. As we continue to increase the effectiveness and value of our events, and build our social media profile we aim to strengthen our relationship with postgrads as their students' association.

Academic Conference Grants

In early 2019 we overhaled the application process for the Academic Conference Grants. These awards are generously sponsored by Vice-Provost (Research) Professor Margaret Hyland and provide funding for PGSA members presenting their work at an international conference. The changes have been enormously successful. In 2018 we distributed five grants. This year we have distributed **17**! We initially had a sum of $10,000, which amounted to 20 grants at $500 each. However, with the changes made to the Research excellence awards, we now have $25,000. This means we can increase the value of the grant up to $1,000 and still be able to offer at least 25 grants. We're in the process of finalising this change, so keep an eye out for the announcement!

Research Excellence Awards

In mid-2019 we revised the Research Excellence Awards so that the funds are no longer distributed as a grant which must be used for research purposes. The award recognises excellent work done without confusing it with work to come! As a consequence, we accepted a reduction in the amount offered for these awards from $3,000 to $1,500; but the $15,000 difference will be transferred to the Academic Conference Grants. Because more students can now meet the eligibility criteria, the change has resulted in a significant increase in the uptake for the awards. We had a total of 70 applicants this year as opposed to 44 last year, at least one applicant from every faculty where last year some faculties had no applicants, and 8 applicants for the Maori Knowledge and Development Award as opposed to none last year. We did not see the increase in uptake among master's students that we expected – we had 8 applicants this year and 7 last year.

Student Representation

The PGSA represents postgraduate students on key Boards and Committees at the University from the Faculty level upwards. Representatives on these committees are drawn from the PGSA Executive and other postgraduate volunteers. 2019 saw an active effort to identify Boards and Committees where there was no postgraduate representative and recruit representatives to those committees. Our Co-Vice Presidents have worked hard to ensure postgrad representation throughout the University.

The PGSA thanks all those who have contributed to the postgraduate community through service on a University Board or Committee this year. For any postgraduate students interested in taking up a representative position on a Board or Committee check out the vacancies here or register your interest by emailing pgsa@vuw.ac.nz.

A priority in 2020 will be further developing communication between the PGSA Executive and the postgraduates who volunteer on boards and committees so that we can more effectively engage with the University.

SUBMISSIONS / ADVOCACY

Victoria Doctoral Scholarship

We continued the work from last year to increase the value of the stipend and have the levy covered by the stipend. Our members wrote letters to Vice-Provost (Research) Professor Margaret Hyland, who used those letters to advocate for an increase to the scholarship. Our committee reps have worked hard to bring the issue to the attention of staff, who have been very supportive. We were asked for feedback on the University's strategic plan, and our number one issue was given as the need for an increase to this scholarship. We are awaiting the 2020 budget to see whether our work has taken effect. We are hoping for at least a staged increase and our points regarding the requirement to pay the levy before getting access to funds and the need for a regular review of the value of the scholarship have been taken on board. We are hopeful for change, but if there is none, the campaign will continue in 2020.

Postgraduate Student Allowances

We collaborated with NZUSA to present at Select Committee on the restoration of postgraduate student eligibility for student allowances. You can read the select committee report here. Our aim is to have postgraduate student allowances restored as part of Budget 2020. We will continue to work with NZUSA to on this campaign.

Timesheets for Tutors

As part of the Holidays Act remediation process the Victoria University of Wellington received the legal advice that to be compliant with all the relevant employment legislation, all employees who work irregular hours have to record the hours they work. This affects tutors because tutors currently work irregular hours. It means that the University must implement time-sheets. The current best estimate for when this will be implemented is Trimester 1 of 2020.

We have met with the University HR and the Tertiary Education Union to discuss the matter. The University's position is that the current situation is working for both the University and tutors, however the MBIE labour inspector insists that the hours of work must be recorded. With the implied threat of prosecution for non-compliance the University will implement the change.

While the PGSA recognises that a record of hours worked is necessary unless hours of work are strictly scheduled, the PGSA does not believe that there is only one solution. Tutors are currently waged staff with an hourly rate. When timesheets are implemented in this situation, tutors will be paid according to their timesheets. The PGSA believes there is another potential solution which more closely mirrors the current situation with regards to pay: tutors could be part-time salaried staff. This would not remove the requirement to make a record of time worked, but it would mean that pay is not linked to it. The record of hours worked serves as a means to test that salaried staff are not being paid below minimum wage and to check eligibility for holiday pay only.

In coming months, the PGSA will consult with members.

Minimum Resource Agreement

The Minimum Resource Agreement has expired. At the AGM this year the PGSA is presenting a document which outlines the approach the PGSA executive would like to take in renegotiating the MRA. The aim of the document is to ask for PGSA member feedback on the executive's proposed approach. Please read the document and give feedback on the following:

- Are the proposed changes reasonable, and likely to improve circumstances for thesis students?
- Are there any additional changes to the MRA that should be proposed (within the constraints outlined)?

EVENTS

The PGSA runs events which fulfil three general functions: community building, supporting postgraduate research/development, and promoting the excellence of postgraduate research at Victoria University of Wellington.

Community Building

The community building function is the most challenging as the postgraduate community is diverse and fragmented. In the second half of 2019 we re-branded an event which had gone through several iterations first as First Fridays/Tuesday Chats in 2018 then as Quizzical in the first half of 2019. The event is now called Breakfast Social and is held on the first Friday of each month at Milk and Honey in Kelburn and on the last Friday of each month at Vic Books in Pipitea. The PGSA offers everyone a free tea/coffee. The event is now well attended at both Kelburn and Pipitea. In 2020 the PGSA will work on promoting the event and encouraging increased attendance.

The PGSA would welcome suggestions from members on community building events and will experiment in 2020 with other events which create a sense of community amongst the diverse postgraduate student body.

Supporting Postgraduate Research/Development

In 2018 the PGSA ran "Research Roundtables" and "Kickstart Your Thesis!". In 2019 these events were rebranded "Postgrad Talks" and "Writing to Finish". These were successful events in 2018 and continued to be successful in 2019.

Writing to Finish is a communal writing event. Communal writing can be a powerful tool for getting concerted chunks of work done in a supportive and quiet environment. When there are 24 other people around you working hard on their research, you tend to jump on board and produce some great work too! Owing to the popularity of the event the PGSA intends to increase the number of events held in 2020 as well as booking larger rooms. We made minor modifications to the format for 2019, but in 2020 we will return to the 2018 format where workshops run from 9am-5pm, with snacks, drinks and lunch provided by the PGSA. At the beginning of the day, each participant sets three ambitious goals for their time in the workshop, and as the goals are achieved, participants receive rewards.

The Postgrad Talks provide an opportunity for postgrads to present their research and ideas in a non-threatening environment among their peers, obtain constructive criticism/feedback on their work, network with other postgraduate students and forge effective relationships that enhance their personal and professional development. Postgraduate students are invited to submit abstracts on their research and are allowed to make a 15 minute presentation, after which they receive audience feedback and comments. Students are encouraged to present their work regardless of the stage/level of their studies, or they may just attend the session for enlightenment, support, interaction, to establish a network or just to have some free food! The PGSA alternates the sessions between the Kelburn, Pipitea and Te Aro campuses. In 2019 we have rapidly filled any speaking slots available, and we are delighted to fill this need for a practice environment. The challenge in 2019 has been attracting audience members – students express interest in attending the event but don't turn out on the day. We have also found that the timing of the lunch order can be an issue. If food is ordered to arrive at the end of the session it can arrive too late; once many people have got bored and left. In 2020 the exec will work on encouraging audience attendance for the event.

The 3 minute thesis (3MT) competition is another event which supports postgraduate development by challenging research students to communicate the significance of their projects to a general audience in just three minutes. The 3MT competition supports a common Graduate Attribute for research degree candidates: the capacity to communicate ideas effectively to a range of audiences. From the 3MT competition this year there are a number of important modifications for 2020:

1. Use the rubric: have the judges at each session complete and calculate the score for each participant and then use the scores from all the heats to decide the finalists. (the sessions are lumpy with high attendance at some sessions and low attendance at others – using a rubric to judge across all sessions will allow us to determine best competitors from each faculty [which we can recognise with prizes] as well as best competitors overall [who we'll invite to compete in the final])
2. In 2019 we had a high degree of interest in participating in the 3MT, but a high degree of dropout just prior to the event. In 2020 the exec should use mailchimp's email automation system to maintain the ongoing engagement of every person who registers.
3. Create a separate masters/honours round and encourage participation in that
4. Increase the masters/honours prize to $1,000 (to be comparative with the prize money that other universities are giving)
5. Ensure the event is well promoted & send an email to the faculty deans notifying them of the event, inviting them to attend, and asking them to encourage academic staff to attend the event.

Promoting the Excellence of Postgraduate Research at Victoria University of Wellington

The PGSA also runs to events which promote the excellence of postgraduate research at VUW: the 3 Minute Thesis competition and the Victoria's Awards. These events put the excellence of the postgraduate community at VUW on display. One of the aims of these events is to demonstrate the excellence and value of the postgraduate community to the University's senior leadership. The 3 Minute Thesis competition highlights postgraduate research and communication skill, while the Victoria's Awards recognise student research, community service, and teaching, as well as the people who help us along the way: VUW supervisors and professional staff. To ensure the University continues to see the value of the postgraduate community it is important that the University's senior leadership is invited to attend these events.

Annual Fundraiser

The PGSA has for many years held an annual fundraiser. Usually in Pub Quiz format. In 2019 the PGSA did not hold this annual fundraiser. In 2020 the PGSA will consider re-instating this long-standing tradition.

VOLUNTEERS

The PGSA is always on the lookout for keen people to join us! In addition to being a member, you might be interested in joining the Executive, or contributing to the student representation the PGSA coordinates by taking a seat on one of the many boards and committees at the University. If you are interested, please contact pgsa@vuw.ac.nz for more information!