

VOTE



ELENA BYRNE

for

POSTGRADUATE OFFICER

POSTGRADUATE FUNDING

DEVELOPING SUPPORT FOR DEGREE TRANSITIONS

POSTGRADUATE MENTAL HEALTH

SUPPORTING POSTGRADUATE STUDENTS FROM MINORITY GROUPS

Vote from 1st- 4th March on qubsu.org

Hi, I'm Elena Byrne and I'm running to be your next Postgraduate Officer!

I am a current PGT languages student studying MRes Arts and Humanities

I'm also the part-time Postgraduate Taught Officer!

Why am I running?

There is a huge need for change in relation to the overall postgraduate experience both at Taught and Research level. During my 5 years at Queen's, my involvement with the SU has brought the most rewarding opportunities to get involved with activism and student politics. This year has taught me so much and I believe that, if elected, I will uphold the role to the best of my ability. I am passionate about helping students and if elected, I will do everything that I can to ensure that the Postgraduate student voice is represented and heard.

Who am I?

I am a current MRes Arts and Humanities student within Spanish, coming from my undergraduate background of Spanish and Portuguese. I am the current part-time Postgraduate Taught Officer within QUBSU and current acting school rep for AEL. I sit on Student Council, SU Executive Management Committee and the SU Management Board and I have previously been both an academic rep and President of the Spanish and Portuguese Society. During my time at Queen's, the SU has been at the heart of my experience and has always been an important symbol of activism and change - one which I have loved being a part of and would love to be a bigger part of as a full-time officer.



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What I care about:

Postgraduate Funding:

One of the major issues faced by postgraduate students is the lack of adequate funding available to them to support them in their studies. At present, the current postgraduate tuition fee loan in NI is £5,500 which is significantly less than postgraduate course tuition fees which stand at at least £6,000. It is ludicrous that students are unable to afford wanting to continue their education.

Postgraduate students are already at a huge disadvantage due to not receiving a maintenance loan, meaning they are struggling to afford to survive alongside the demands of postgraduate education and that they are often out of pocket for because of the lack of funding. Students are trying to balance work alongside studies and other responsibilities they may have, which is totally unfair given the expectations and demands of postgraduate degrees. Students in NI are also disproportionately affected in comparison to students in England, Scotland and Wales who receive higher tuition fee loans and maintenance loans to assist with living costs.

If elected, this will be a huge focus of my work for the year and I will continue to lobby Stormont to ensure that postgraduate tuition fee loans sufficiently cover postgraduate tuition fees, that loan amounts are dependent on individual courses rather than a standard maximum loan which is below average course fees, and fighting for a maintenance allowance for Postgraduate students.

Underfunding of postgraduate students cannot continue and if necessary change doesn't happen, our current education circumstances are the future education circumstances! #FundOurPostgrads.

Developing support for degree transitions:

The move from undergraduate to postgraduate can come as a shock to many people, especially finding that the level of independence is much greater. This is also especially the case for students who have taken time between degrees and may not have been at university for some time. There certainly needs to be more support for incoming PG students, such as information sessions, workshops and clear support network access in relation to the huge academic and personal aspects related to the degree transition.

Preparing students as much as possible is key in ensuring that students are confident and well-prepared in their move from their move from UG to PG. Equally, there is certainly much to be done in relation to helping students transition from Postgraduate Taught to Postgraduate Research. It often feels like PGT students have barely started their master's degree and they are expected to commit themselves to the process of a PhD application whilst trying to navigate their master's. This also applies to students who perhaps intend to take some time away from education before they begin their PhD. In my part-time officer plan of work, I am currently working with The Graduate School and the SU to develop more of a support network of information, events and networks to ensure that. Students feel fully supported. It is important that clear, concise and structured information and support is provided to students to help with beginning either master's or research degrees. If elected, I intend to continue to develop support resources and review what already exists to ensure it is standard practise that students are able to receive and ask for the help that they need to feel comfortable in transitioning.

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Postgraduate Mental Health:

As with the entire student body, mental health is a dominant issue amongst Postgraduate students. Postgraduate study is already a hugely demanding journey both academically and personally for many and the demands of a PGT or PGR degree mean that often personal and social sacrifices are made at the expense of students' wellbeing. Particularly during this pandemic, we have seen mental health issues skyrocket as a result of the feeling of isolation and that is why it is more important than ever to continue building a community atmosphere both online and when life resumes in-person and on-campus. This is of particular importance to those international students who have joined, or are continuing their time in, the Postgraduate student body at Queen's and were faced with the challenge of adapting to a new course and a new university whilst having to isolate. The value of establishing relationships and networks both academically and personally is so important, and I would like to continue to create possibilities for connections beyond a Teams meeting or an in-person seminar with regular drop-ins and forums, hopefully with the chance to do so in-person.

Encouraging open discussion in forums, meetings and fostering a supportive sense of community will be vital in creating an open, understanding attitude around the many worries and feelings of imposter syndrome that students feel in the face of the pressures of postgraduate life. Harbouring an open, honest environment will encourage students that many of us are in the same boat at different points throughout our degree and hopefully contribute to a sense of collective support in relation to completing our degrees.

It is important that information regarding mental health support is easily accessible for students, as well as the services themselves, to make seeking support an easy process and one less thing to worry about. Ensuring that direct feedback on support is received from students and working on meeting students' needs is crucial in helping students access the type of support they need individually. If elected, Postgraduate mental health will be at the fore of my policies and activity as Postgraduate Officer, working with students both individually and as a collective, for the benefit of the Postgraduate student body.

Supporting Postgraduate students from minority groups:

The academic demands of a postgraduate degree are already tough to deal with, never mind for those in our university and postgraduate community that have extra responsibilities to deal with, such as those who are parents, carers and/or have dependents, students with disabilities etc. Issues have been raised in relation to the delay in the provision of Disabled Students Allowance, which is unacceptable and some part-time students have felt left out in relation to receiving communications and information. International students have been disproportionately affected this year, paying extortionate fees for an experience that they were promised and did not receive. Many students were not able to come to Queen's yet still had to pay enormous fees to study online, which is ridiculous. Equally, for those that came to Belfast, the year has been extremely difficult because of the feelings of isolation and uncertainty, which has only heightened the task of trying to adapt and settle into a new university, a new country and for some, a new way of life. I think it is of huge importance to ensure that regular forums and drop-ins to support specific groups of students are created so that issues that they face can be identified and brought forward for change to be implemented. We have seen recently that both part-time and international students have been left out of the £500 covid disruption payment, which is unacceptable. It is vital to foster an inclusive Postgraduate community in which no student is left behind or struggling disproportionately. If elected, I will ensure that the voices of all Postgraduate students are carried forward and heard by the university in order to create much-needed change and receive the appropriate support required.



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These are only some examples of what I intend to work on but which are crucial elements of the postgraduate experience.

Now, more than ever, the student voice is crucial in creating much-needed change.

Postgraduate students need access to appropriate funding, their mental health needs to be taken seriously and the sense of community needs to be fostered. Please consider voting for me as your next Postgraduate Officer on 1st-4th March!

Thanks so much!

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