



Student Advice Service Annual Report

June 2011

INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD

“The Student Advice Service has been a tremendous success in its first year. Both CUSU and the GU have previously struggled to cope with the level of casework that the organizations experienced – employing a Student Advisor has solved this problem, and Lisa Dery has made extremely positive contributions to a wide range of the activities run by both of the unions.

The Student Advice Service team has worked hard this year to professionalise the support both unions offer to students, to publicise it effectively and to help students through whatever situation they are experiencing. CUSU congratulates the team on their successes this year.”



Rahul Mansigani
CUSU President

“We are extremely happy with the success of the Student Advice Service this year. This report shows that it is providing a much needed additional source of support to GU members – both postgraduates and mature undergraduate students.

The Student Advisor has been a very welcome addition to the Graduate Union, and it is has been very beneficial to both CUSU and the GU to work together on such a successful shared initiative this year. The GU would like to express its thanks to the Student Advice Service team – particularly to the Student Advisor, who has contributed enormously to its success and has become a tremendous asset to the GU.”



Amina Rai
GU President

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This year, CUSU and the GU received £33,500 from the University to create a Student Advice Service, professionalising the support the unions have always provided to individual students. We can also act as representatives for students at College or University hearings.

Students can come to the Advice Service with any issues they might experience as a student – we offer a listening ear, a referral service and more in depth support for students, depending on the issue.

We are funded from three sources (the University grant and funds from CUSU and the Graduate Union).

Considerable effort this year has been devoted to setting up the service (as detailed in the Student Advice Service Activities section), which has been challenging but successful. As well as having directly supported 214 students this year, the Student Advice Service has been involved heavily in other areas – providing training to JCRs/MCRs, running roadshows, and committing to the welfare-related events of both CUSU and the Graduate Union.

CASEWORK SUMMARY

The Student Advice Service has supported 214 students this year: 166 cases and 97 enquiries. Of those students whose details were known: 49% were undergraduates and 51% were graduates (compared to a 60/40% split in the University), 54% were women and 28% of undergraduates were mature students. 40% of our casework came from 7 colleges.

Our most common case types were disability issues, finance, difficulties with colleges, degrading/intermitting and student complaints. Our busiest months so far have been October and November. Our new Student Advisor has dealt with 53% of our casework.

ACTIVITIES SUMMARY

This year, our other major activities have been related to setting up the Service. This has included becoming accredited and joining various national organisations, establishing an effective case work management system, organising weekly reflective practice meetings, regular reviews and regular planning days, publicising the service throughout the University, establishing relationships with various people and organisations within the University, and writing comprehensive internal policy for the Service. We have also provided training to an extensive range of students, including JCR/MCR Officers and peer supporters.

MEMBERSHIP OF THE ADVICE SERVICE

2010-11

- Morgan Wild (CUSU-GU Student Support Officer)
- Lisa Dery (CUSU-GU Student Advisor)
- Maria Helmling (CUSU Education Officer)
- Sarah Peters-Harrison (CUSU Women's Officer)
- Amina Rai (GU President) – until Michaelmas 2010

2011-12

- Rosie O'Neill (CUSU-GU Student Support Officer)
- Lisa Dery (CUSU-GU Student Advisor)
- Morgan Wild (CUSU Education Officer)
- Ruth Graham (CUSU Women's Officer)

CASEWORK REPORT

The Student Advice Service has been accessed by 214 students since mid-July 2010. The Service has assisted with 166 cases¹ and 78 enquiries. The casework load has been manageable throughout the year, with some peak pressure points detailed below. At the time of writing, we are also about to enter what we expect to be one of our busiest periods, during which we expect the number of students accessing the Service to rise considerably.

STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS

While the Service has seen a broad mix of students throughout the year, some trends in the demographics of students who access the Service can be identified.

TABLE 1 – STUDENTS BY UNDERGRADUATE/POSTGRADUATE SPLIT

Student Type	% of students	Number of Students
Postgraduate	47%	101
Undergraduate	45%	98
Unknown	8%	15

TABLE 2 – STUDENTS BY COURSE TYPE

Course Type	% of students	Number of students
Undergraduate	45%	98
PhD	25%	51
MPhil	13%	27
Other ²	3%	6
Unknown	15%	32

¹ For data management reasons, each specific issue that a student comes to us with is recorded as a separate case/enquiry. Therefore, there are more cases/enquiries than there are students.

² MSt, PGCE, MAST, MBA

We have seen disproportionately higher numbers of graduate students than undergraduates (excluding students whose status was unknown, 51% are graduates to 49% undergraduates, compared with actual proportions in the University of 40% to 60%). It is unclear what definitive reason there is for this, though possible explanations include graduate students tending to be less involved in college communities (and thus less likely to access college pastoral support) than undergraduates, and the fact that we have a far greater visible presence in the GU (which is used as a social space), which leads to a higher number of drop-ins. Within the Service users who were graduates, 27% were MPhil students, 51% were PhD students, with negligible numbers for other course types (and 22% were unknown).

TABLE 3 – STUDENTS BY MATURE/STANDARD AGE SPLIT (UNDERGRADUATE)

We have seen disproportionately higher numbers of mature students than standard age students (within the undergraduate population), with 28% to 72% (excluding students whose age we did not know).

Mature	% of undergraduate students	Number of students
Standard Age	45%	44
Mature	17%	17
Unknown	38%	37

TABLE 4 – STUDENTS BY GENDER

The Service has seen disproportionately higher numbers of female students than male students – excluding unknown and other, 57% to 43%.

Gender	% of students	Number of students
Female	54%	115
Male	40%	86
Unknown/Other	6%	13

COLLEGES

We have also seen a disproportionate number of students from relatively few colleges – (excluding data for unknown colleges) 40% of our cases come from just 7 colleges (*see Appendix 1*). There are a number of possible reasons for this (for example, the Service could have been advertised better in some colleges than others). However, it will be a trend we continue to track in future years.

CASE TYPES

The Service has experienced a broad range of issues in both its cases and enquiries this year – from common issues, such as de-grading/intermitting or exam allowances, to less frequent issues, such as plagiarism and fitness to practice issues.

TABLE 5 – CASES BY MATTER TYPE (ACADEMIC, SOCIAL/PERSONAL, OTHER)³

Matter Type	Number of cases/enquiries
Academic	139
Social/Personal	86
Other	34

TABLE 6 – CASES BY MATTER TYPE (UNIVERSITY, COLLEGE, EXAMINATION, FACULTY, OTHER)⁴

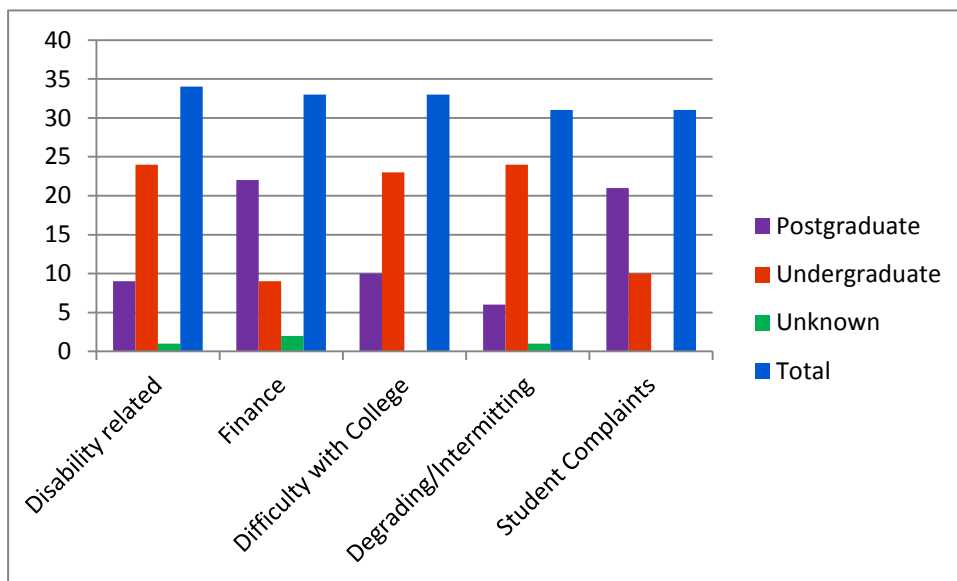
Matter Type	Number of cases/enquires
University-related	101
College-related	72
Examination related	54
Department/Faculty-related	48
External Body Related	14
Other	18

³ Each case can have multiple matter types.

⁴ see note 2.

The majority of our cases/enquiries have been related to students’ academic experience (57%) with 35% being social/personal related, and 14% being other related. A large number of our cases involve a matter pertaining to a student’s college (though this proportion is less for postgraduates) or their relationship with a University body (such as the Applications Committee, or the Board of Graduate Studies).

TABLE 7 – MOST COMMON CASE/ENQUIRY TYPES



Each case can (and almost always does) have multiple “case types”.

The most common cases and enquiries we have been addressing are: issues that arise out of a student being disabled (which could range from an enquiry about what support is available in Cambridge to a student having difficulty getting the adjustments they believe are reasonable), finance (with twice as many postgraduates as undergraduates having difficulties with finance), difficulties with college (which covers issues where a student has a conflict or a disagreement with their college), de-grading/intermitting and student complaints.

REFERRALS

The tables below detail how students heard about the Student Advice Service, and which services we referred students on to⁵. If we refer students on, it does not necessarily mean that we do not continue giving them support – often students will seek support from multiple sources if they have a range of needs (such as a student seeking support from the Student Advice Service about an academic issue, who feels they would also benefit from seeing the Counselling Service due to the emotional impact the situation has had on them).

It is also routine that, in exploring options with students, we will ask most students whether they have spoken to their Tutor, or DoS, or the DRC, etc. etc. This information has not been recorded.

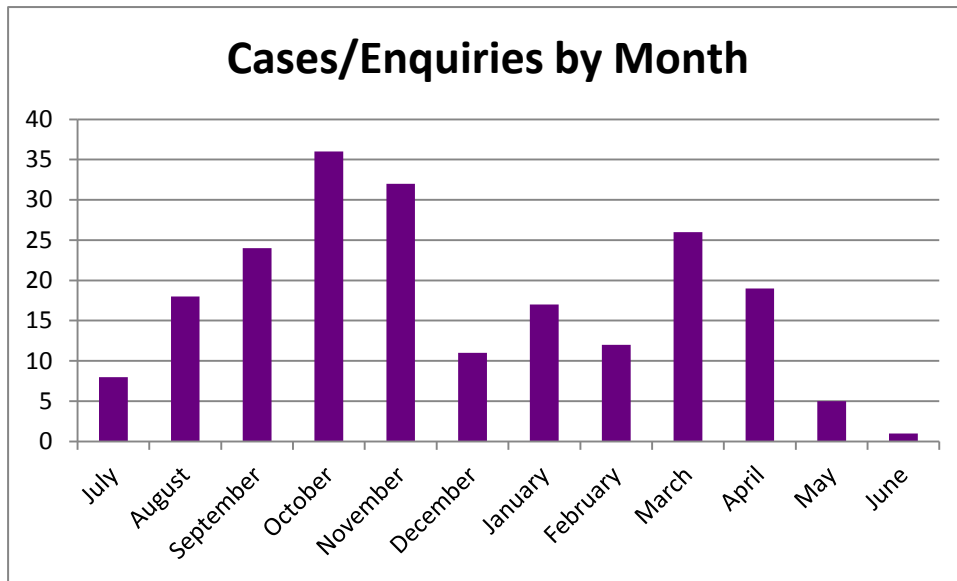
TABLE 8/9 – HOW STUDENTS FOUND OUT ABOUT THE SERVICE/ REFERALLS FROM THE SERVICE

How Students Found Out About the Service	Number	Referred Students	Number
Tutor/Senior Tutor	3	Tutor/Tutorial Office	32
Director of Studies	1	Director of Studies	8
JCR/MCR	2	JCR/MCR	3
DRC	2	DRC	9
Counselling Service	5	Counselling Service	11
Friends	22	International Office	4
Publicity	2	Office of Intercollegiate Services	2
CUSU Officer/Staff	19	Childcare Office	1
GU Officer/Staff	6	Board of Graduate Studies	10
Website	6	Faculty/Department	10
College Nurse	1	GP	5
Other	4	Police	3
Unknown	43	Other	29

⁵ Both these data sets are incomplete, given that this data only began being collected at a later point in the year.

PEAK PERIODS AND AVERAGE CASE LENGTH

TABLE 10 – PEAK PERIODS FOR ADVICE SERVICE



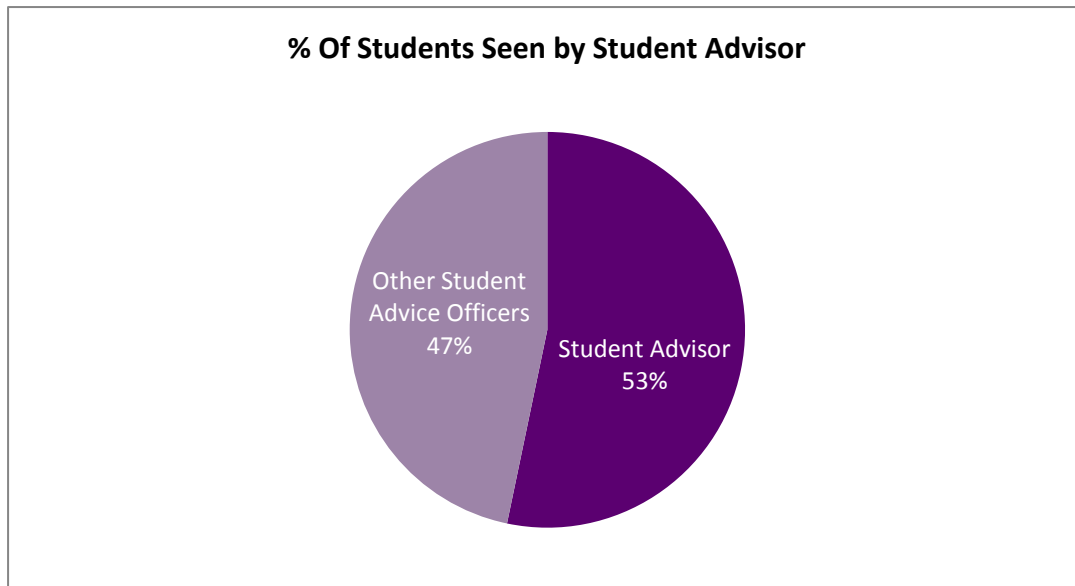
This table shows cases by their opening date and does not reflect the number of cases the Service is dealing with at any one time..

As this table shows, there have been certain peak months for the Advice Service – particularly during Michaelmas and towards the end of Lent Term (note: we anticipate, based on previous sabbatical teams’ experience, a large influx of undergraduate casework regarding examinations in June and July, which have not been included in this report).

The average length of time that cases (excluding enquiries) take has been 36 days (which reflects the complexity of many of the cases that we deal with).

IMPACT OF STUDENT ADVISOR

TABLE 11 – PROPORTION OF STUDENTS SEEN BY STUDENT ADVISOR



One of the major objectives for the Student Advice Service was to reduce the amount of casework that sabbatical officers were solely responsible for. This has been achieved to a great degree this year, with the Student Advisor dealing with 53% of students, allowing sabbatical officers to devote much time, previously taken up by casework, to other projects. Both CUSU and the GU feel it is important to note the extremely positive effect that having a Student Advisor doing the majority of casework has had on both organisations.

STUDENT ADVICE SERVICE ACTIVITIES (JULY 2010 – JUNE 2011)

As well as supporting individual students, the Student Advice Service has been engaged in many other activities related to its objectives – including creating and managing the Service itself, providing and receiving training and creating internal policy, creating a framework in which we can guarantee a high level of service to all students, publicising the Service and establishing relationships within and outside the University.

CREATING AND MANAGING THE ADVICE SERVICE

MEMBERSHIP OF NATIONAL ORGANISATIONS

Setting up the Service has been a challenging but successful effort. We have joined AdviceUK (the UK's largest support network for free, independent advice centres), which allows the Service access to their training and resources, as well as their subsidised professional liability insurance. The Service has also joined AMOSSHE (the Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education) and RAWs (Research and Welfare Staff in student unions), and has benefitted from the access to training, resources and advice that membership of these organisations afford.

STUDENT ADVICE SERVICE BUDGET

Our budget for next year was submitted and approved as part of the CUSU Budget (*see Appendix 2* for next year's budget). Managing the budget this year has been challenging, and we have had to make economies in certain areas – we have made the most of our Student Advisor's knowledge and skills (as well as the generosity from other professionals within the University), allowing us to run most of our training in-house, rather than getting external bodies to provide them, for example. However, for many of our trainings, it would still be beneficial to have outside specialists running them. However, we have kept on budget for this year, and we have managed to keep £1,600 back to be spent next year, to accommodate the 2% cut to the Student Advice Service budget.

CASEWORK RECORD MANAGEMENT

We have also been professionalising our record keeping from the beginning of the year. Each student is asked to complete a confidential Casework Form, which provides the Service with the necessary personal information for our records and for generating reports on these records.

For most of this year, the Service had been using AdvicePro – the market-leading online, secure casework management system – to record our data. AdvicePro is a system that was originally designed to be used by generic advice centres. Though Advicepro has grown to become more student specific, we found it difficult to customise and adapt to Cambridge's collegiate system. This made it a challenging system to work with given the different case types, terminologies and issues

that we face. As a result, data entry was cumbersome and counterintuitive, and there seems to be uncertainty about AdvicePro's continued existence in the future⁶.

Given these issues, we made the decision to transition to an in-house database and used our experience with AdvicePro (positive and negative) to help us create a system which afforded us far greater customisation, functionality, ease of data use and the ability to generate far more relevant reports. This database is stored in a secure, confidential section of CUSU's fileservers. In the past month, we have finished transferring all the data from AdvicePro on to the new Student Advice Service database – all data contained within this report is sourced from the new database.

Next year, the Service plans to produce an Hours' Report for each Advice Officer.

REGULAR WEEKLY ACTIVITIES

Each week, all Advice Officers meet for reflective practice – which allows us to share best practice, solve problems regarding difficult cases together, and reflect on how we might improve the level of support we provide to individual students (it is made clear to every student that confidentiality holds between them and the Service, not them and an individual Advice Officer). This is coupled with a planning session, which plans the activities of the Advice Service for the coming weeks. The Student Support Officer and the Student Advisor also meet up each week to coordinate the day to day management of the Service.

The Student Advice Service has also run three monthly review and planning sessions with Advice Officers; these have been complemented by formal review sessions by CUSU and the GU (attended by the Presidents of both student unions, as well as the GU Administration and the CUSU General Manager).

Next year, as way of ensuring best practice, the Service plans to introduce a casework monitoring system. This will involve picking a case at random and discussing what went well and what could be improved in the Service's handling of the case.

Starting in Lent Term, the Service held weekly roadshows – which involved going out on to lecture sites to advertise the Service (usually with a weekly theme, providing information on issues such as stress and fifth week blues). It was felt that these were a mixed success, as students were often reticent to approach stalls on a public site to talk about issues, and we will be re-evaluating them to make sure that they are an effective measure in advertising the Service to students.

The Service provides regular updates on its activities to both student unions, through updating to the GU Board (weekly), the CUSU staff meetings (fortnightly) and GU and CUSU Council (once a term).

⁶ Its parent company, Resolution, recently went into administration.

PUBLICITY

The Student Advice Service has been proactive in advertising itself throughout the year. We have produced posters and leaflets, which have been sent out to Senior Tutors, departmental secretaries, welfare officers, nurses, the DRC, the Counselling Service, the Childcare Office, the International Office and the Board of Graduate Studies. The Service has also been advertised in CUSU's and the GU's annual publications, including the CUSU Freshers' Guides, the CUSU Wall Planner, the CUSU Cambridge Guide and the GU Handbook. It has been advertised regularly throughout the year in The Cambridge Student, the GU Bulletin and the CUSU Bulletin (which are all produced weekly). Each Advice Officer has Student Advice Service stash and business cards, and the Student Advice Service has a presence on both the CUSU and GU websites (as well as on its own website).

We also had a visible presence at many events throughout the year – such as the International Students' Orientation, the CUSU Societies Fair, the GU's Freshers' Week, the Childcare Office Welcome event and the GU Orientation.

ESTABLISHING RELATIONSHIPS

A key priority early on was establishing relationships with various organisations and people within the University, all of whom have been generous in providing assistance and advice to the new Service.

Our new Student Advisor had meetings with the College Nurses' Association, the Welfare and Finance Committee, members of the Education Section, the Board of Graduate Studies, members of the Applications Committee, the International Office, the Childcare Office, the Disability Resource Centre, the Counselling Service, the Mental Health Advisor, the Equality and Diversity team and the PBI Office.

Outside of the University, we also met with Anglia Ruskin's Student Union Advice Service on a regular basis, who provided advice and support to us throughout the year. We also met with the University's police liaison officer, staff from the OpenOut scheme, and the head of the Office of the Independent Adjudicator. We have also provided support and advice to Cambridge Regional College on a number of student union related issues.

PROVIDING TRAINING

ADVICE OFFICERS

To ensure that Advice Officers were able to offer the highest level of support, every officer involved in providing support to students underwent an extensive programme of training throughout the year (particularly over the summer). Sessions included:

- Providing Excellent Service

- Active Listening Skills
- Managing Expectations
- Confidentiality
- Boundaries
- Case recording
- Equality and Diversity
- Time Management
- Women's issues and oppression
- Student complaints
- Unusual cases
- Exam appeals

These trainings were offered through a combination of external providers and advice officers training each other.

Our Student Advisor has also received trainings in the following areas:

- Extensive induction from CUSU sabbatical officers
- Welcome to Cambridge
- Tutoring: Support for New Appointees
- Government of the University – the College's Connection
- Stress – A manager's responsibility
- Train the Trainer
- Safeguarding Vulnerable Adults
- Managing Staff Performance
- Disability Identity
- AMOSSHE Conference (Association of Managers of Student Services in Higher Education)
- RAWs Conference (Research and Welfare Staff in student unions)

WELFARE AND OTHER JCR/MCR OFFICERS

The Student Advice Service has also provided extensive training to JCR and MCR officers, to make sure that they have access to support and skills in what can often be very demanding part time roles. These included:

- Role of a Welfare Officer
- Reducing the Risk of Suicide (provided in conjunction with Mark Phippen, head of the Counselling Service)
- Welfare Officer Core Skills (on active listening, boundaries and confidentiality)
- How to respond to students in distress (provided by Lisa Halpern from the Counselling Service)
- Understanding students from a social perspective (provided with CUSU's autonomous campaigns)

- Student Mental Health: An Introduction (provided by Lisa Halpern from the Counselling Service)
- MCR Academic Officers Forum
- Committee Skills (provided in conjunction with Rob Wallach)
- Supporting Students in Exam term
- Academic Welfare in Exam Term (for Peer2Peer supporters)
- Candidates' briefing (co-ordinating a welfare briefing for candidates in this year's CUSU elections)

INTERNAL POLICY

The Student Advice Service has also been developing its best practice into internal policy. This year, we have updated CUSU's Individual Student Support Service's (the Student Advice Service's predecessor) confidentiality policy into the Student Advice Service confidentiality policy, which sets out what students can expect from the Student Advice Service in terms of confidentiality, and the (rare) conditions under which confidentiality can be breached.

We have also developed a fair and transparent complaints procedure. If users of the Service have any issues with the level of support or service they have received, they have two options. They can either provide feedback (which can be provided anonymously) - which will be discussed at the Service's next reflective practice – or they can make a formal complaint about the support they received.

Finally, we have developed a Code of Practice – this sets out how the Student Advice Service works, the values of the Advice Service, and what a student who uses the Advice Service can expect. We have attached a copy (*Appendix 3*). We will be providing students who come to us with a copy of this Code of Practice in leaflet form, so that every student who uses the Service will know what to expect and what not to expect from the Advice Service.

OTHER ACTIVITIES

Through the course of the year, the Advice Service has been involved in the transition of the Peer Support scheme to Peer2Peer. We have provided training for new Peer2Peer supporters, as well as providing ourselves as a source of advice and support to peer supporters dealing with difficult situations.

We have also been providing similar support to JCR/MCR Welfare Officers, as a service they can speak to about any difficult situations they are dealing with.

The Service's Student Advisor has received regular supervision sessions at the Counselling Service, where she receives an opportunity to confidentially reflect on her work and discuss difficult issues she is encountering.

The Student Advisor has also provided support and reflective practice for the facilitators of CUSU's Eating Disorders Self Help and Support Group.

The Service has also participated in research for student parents that is being conducted by a Cambridge PhD student.

CONCLUSION

All in all, it's been a great year for the Student Advice Service. The Service's team has injected tremendous energy and commitment into getting the Service up and running, and the CUSU and the GU sabbatical officers and staff have been extremely supportive and enthusiastic throughout the year. Furthermore, the Service and its team have been very warmly welcomed by countless services and colleagues within the University and colleges. We have thoroughly enjoyed and appreciated the interest and encouragement so many have shown us and we look forward to a bright future for the Student Advice Service.



Morgan Wild

CUSU-GU Student Support Officer (2010-11)



Lisa Dery

CUSU-GU Student Advisor