University of Kent

Spring 2014

theGradPost

The face behind the building: Charles Darwin

Google Glass: A new type of observation

Technology and the future of sign language

Image: Dr Campbell Gourlay

A newsletter created by postgraduates for postgraduates
Hey guys, and welcome to 2014’s first release of the GradPost.

Firstly, we would like to give a big thank you to everyone who helped to make the last publication of 2013 a huge success and that includes all of you who picked up a copy! We are delighted with the positive response we have received and hope that you will find this issue just as enjoyable.

As the last edition focused primarily on the Humanities, in this issue we have a bevy of Science-related articles for your reading pleasure. We take a look at the wonderful world of Bioscience research at the University of Kent, and then have a sneak peek into the future of entrepreneurship and technology over the next ten years. Discover the amazing advances made into sign language technology, and marvel at the possibilities offered by Microsoft’s Google Glass.

In this edition, we will be catching up with the Global Skills Award Programme and featuring the winners of the first round of the Postgraduate Experience Awards. There is also a short update from the Kent Graduate Student Association with a preview of what’s coming up during the rest of this year. Finally, we will be continuing our ‘Face Behind the Building’ and ‘Get Involved’ series with a focus on Charles Darwin and Kent’s Boxing Club.

As always, please do not hesitate to contact us via Facebook, Twitter or email if you are interested in being involved with the publication. We hope the New Year has been treating everyone well so far, and we are looking forward to hearing your responses.

Editors
Jian Wei-Jeanson Gan Lim
MA in the Contemporary
Maria Christine Sveidahl Sommer
MA in Curating
Frances Reading
MA in English and American Literature

KGSA

An update from your KGSA President

Hello,

I hope everyone has had a great holiday period and that work was not too demanding!

For those of you who don’t know, my name is Vid Čalovski and I am the President of the Kent Graduate Student Association (KGSA). It is our responsibility to represent postgraduate students to both Kent Union (KU) and the University. While we primarily deal with the social aspect of your life here at Kent, we also campaign on various issues and try to improve the postgraduate student experience.

At the beginning of last term we helped you all move in during Welcome Week and hosted all sorts of events over the course of the week. Over the rest of the Autumn Term, we held a film night, a games night, helped out with the Master’s buffet and hosted a buffet for Thanksgiving. Although it was a busy first term, we still hope to build on this.

At the time of writing, we are planning a welcome back pizza and film night, which will have free Domino’s pizza and another games night so that students can enjoy a break from their studies. In March we hope to hold a quiz night, charging a small entry fee, with the proceeds going to charity. We have also started planning a postgraduate trip to Edinburgh, which we hope will be in June, so watch this space for more details.

Over the course of the next few months we will be campaigning for free Wednesday afternoons for postgraduate students, so that they can participate in sports. We will also be working with the Kent Union Vice-President (Education), Alex Murray, to ensure that provisions in the library over the summer will not be too disrupted for postgraduates, so that people can get on with their dissertations. Lastly, we would also like to draw your attention to the fact that postgraduate students can use available Woolf seminar rooms that have not been booked for either work or social purposes, between 6.00-11.00pm on weekdays.

To find out more about our events or if you want to get involved, find us on Facebook: https://www.facebook.com/kentgsa or follow us on twitter: @KentGSa or feel free to email via KGSA@kent.ac.uk

Good luck with the new term.

Vid Čalovski
KGSA President
PhD in Social Policy in the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research

Postgraduate Experience Awards 2013-14

First round winners and second round applications

The Graduate School is pleased to announce the winners of the first round of the 2013/14 Postgraduate Experience Awards. The Awards are designed to provide funding to postgraduate students (both taught and research) to run events or projects which have an interdisciplinary or external focus, aimed at enhancing the postgraduate experience at Kent. Funding of up to £1,500 may be awarded to successful candidates.

Congratulations to the following postgraduate students who were awarded funding from the first round of the Awards; Christopher Chang (PhD English), Christina Chatzipoulka (PhD Architecture), Luca Di Gregorio (PhD Italian), and Barbara Franchi (PhD English) for their interdisciplinary conference on ‘Homelessness’.

Further congratulations go to Harriet Gifford (MA Sound and Image), Angela McArthur (MA Sound and Image) and Amie Rai (MA Sound and Image), who successfully secured funding for a series of ‘Inspire Gatherings’.

The deadline for the second round of applications is Friday 21 March and winners will be announced shortly after this.

Hannah Huxley
MA in English and American Literature
Curiously, a world away in Kentucky, by some cosmic coincidence, the baby Abraham Lincoln had also just been born. Darwin spent the days of his youth collecting beetles, already showing the methodical, observational and laborious patience that would come to typify his mature approach to the natural sciences. Flash forward 18 years and the young Darwin had dropped out of medical school, much to the chagrin of his father, and was instead pursuing his lifelong fascination with geology and natural history. The opportunity of his lifetime came early when in 1831 he was offered a supernumerary position on the HMS Beagle. The next five years were spent on an epic odyssey that circumnavigated the globe, on which he made many of the observations that came to be central to his theory of natural selection. The most notable of these came upon reaching the Galápagos Islands, when he noticed that various species differed from island to island. Mockingbirds and giant-tortoises, for instance, exhibited differences of common ancestry. A seed had been planted in Darwin’s mind.

The publication of his journals had ensured him fame in scientific circles by the end of the Beagle’s voyage in 1836 and it was not long before he was elected to the council of the Geological Society of London. Over the next few years and with the assistance of some of the country’s most illustrious scientists, Darwin began to develop his theory of evolution. It was his reading of Malthus’ *An Essay on the Principle of Population* that germinated the already planted seed of natural selection. This essay described the characteristic of animals to breed beyond their resources and led to Darwin noticing that ‘under these circumstances favourable variations would tend to be preserved, and unfavourable ones to be destroyed. The result of this would be the formation of new species’. With this theory now in place it only remained for him to back it up, and years were spent performing countless experiments in the selective breeding of animals and plants.

These preoccupations even leaked into his personal life. When considering the proposal of marriage, he weighed it up with his usual deductive reasoning, citing in the pros column that a wife would be ‘better than a dog anyhow’. Despite his apparent indifference, he concluded: ‘Marry – Marry, Marry QED’ – quod erat demonstrandum (what was to be demonstrated). It was shortly after this time, in 1842, that the newly-wed Darwin moved to Down House in Kent, where he lived the rest of his life with his wife (and cousin) Emma Wedgwood. Here he could avoid the pressures of London that exacerbated his already ailing health.

On February 12 1809, deep in the Shropshire countryside, Susannah Darwin was delivered of one of the most important humans to have lived – Charles Robert Darwin.

Additional pressures came with the publication of Alfred Russel Wallace’s work ‘On the Law which has Regulated the Introduction of New Species.’ These papers displayed theories remarkably similar to Darwin’s own, and he was forced to publish his own findings. His seminal work *On the Origin of Species* was published in 1859; by 1870 it was widely held true and accepted in most scientific circles. Unsurprisingly, the religious implications meant that it was met with controversy and suspicion, particularly in regard to the evolution of man from lower forms i.e. apes. However, even chronic bouts of illness did little to impede Darwin’s single-minded determination to qualify his theories, and in 1871 he published *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex*. By the end of his life the irrefutable evidence he had garnered, left him an agnostic.

His immeasurable contribution to the understanding of the natural world has justly earned him the pre-eminently positioned statue in the main hall of the Natural History museum where, enthroned, he sits king-like. And, as the right of one of the greatest Englishmen, he is to be found on the reverse of every ten-pound banknote. His revolutionary theories changed the face of biology, zoology and anthropology, and thus bear special importance to the University of Kent which has leading schools in all of these fields. They owe him a great debt, as do we all. So in tribute, many of Darwin College’s constituent buildings are also titled after significant names from the man’s life; for instance: ‘Missing Link’, which alludes to the fossil necessary to complete the evolutionary sequence showing man’s descent from the apes. And, of course, the well-loved bar and bistro Origins, named after his magnum opus.

Dan Stocker-Williams
MA in English and American Literature
With small movements of her fingers, she changes the way she sees the world. The view of her bedroom is normal, except for the artificial dimension that is layered over it; in one corner of her vision she expands and then discards a digital display telling her she is running late for lectures. In another there are emails she has received overnight, but by sweeping her thumb from right to left she glances at them and decides there’s nothing urgent.

She drives to campus, changing her route to avoid an accident that has been uploaded live to the Glass as she’s been driving.

So far, the Google Glass headset doesn’t function hugely differently from a smart phone. It provides the same information, gesture recognition technology, allowing the user to subtly motion with one hand and have that translated into movement of data across their field of vision, like gesturing on a touchscreen.

Its Google Glass’ plan to change our way of seeing that is really exciting. From tourists pointing to a building on the skyline and being told, “that is the Shard”, to students highlighting text and searching the internet for an explanation, the applications of the technology are vast and still relatively unknown. It is all about interactive vision.

So imagine that our student arrives at her lecture. Her lecturer can, from a central system, control what appears on the headsets of all students in the class.

Imagine that she and her classmates are able to watch live surgery as it takes place, through the eyes of the surgeon, whose own headset records the whole process from start to finish.

Maybe our student has diabetes and her glasses document the sugar content of everything she eats during the day. Or maybe she is growing plant strains for a research paper and her glasses take regular images while she works, documenting changes in leaf mass and tissue pigmentation.

There are already individuals in the world who document everything about their lives. The term is ‘Life Logging’, and it means taking video or photographing everything that occurs to you, and uploading it to a central database. At the moment, due to the cost of data storage and the inconvenience of carting a video camera around with you, it is a niche field of interest. However, as data becomes cheaper and technology such as Google Glass more universal, it might turn into something huge.

And it is not as unsettling an idea as it first seems. Preliminary designs for programmes that stop filming at critical points, like sensing bathroom visits, are already in production, and it is likely that most of these ‘memories’ will never be viewed again. Instead, they’ll allow individuals to make patterns out of daily behaviour, adjust their calorie intake, find lost car keys, and provide evidence in criminal cases. Crowd sourcing, the idea that the public can offer their problem-solving skills or even their data to help with research, could benefit hugely if Life Loggers could be persuaded to share their stored information. For example, computers sitting through it to determine when and where British citizens catch glimpses of rare birds.

If you can get over the vague sense of foreboding this 1984 approach to technology brings, the possibilities are nearly endless. Once data is stored, all it takes is a clever algorithm to make it useful. Microsoft’s offices in Seattle recently programmed it’s elevators to monitor the travel habits of it’s users, with the result that by watching an employee walk, the lifts are able to predict if they’ll need to press the ‘going up’ button.

At the moment, most of this is theoretical, but Google does seem determined to get it’s Glasses to consumers as soon as possible. For my own part, I’m not really worried about how it will take everything I currently have on my phone and put it in my field of vision. I’m excited about what it could mean for advancing fields where observation is key, and interactive observation could be the future.

Stella Bennett
MSc in Science, Communication and Society
The world of bioscience research

Have you ever wondered what happens within those mysterious Biosciences buildings, behind closed doors by people wearing white lab coats? Well, now I shall open the door on the subject as one of those white coats myself, and hope to show why it is worth thinking about!

In the research labs of the School of Biosciences, many different areas are being investigated, “primarily on essential biological processes at the molecular and cellular level, encompassing the disciplines of biochemistry, genetics, biotechnology and biomedical research”. The research being conducted ranges from cancer drug resistance, problems with DNA repair, In-Vitro Fertilisation (IVF), chromosomal abnormalities, the basis for diseases like Alzheimer’s and ageing, using yeast cell models.

Other labs are looking further into the basis of bacterial, viral and parasite pathogenicity, the structure of proteins and their synthesis, and the optimisation of biological pathways and vitamin synthesis. Some of this work could even reveal new life forms and pathways! It is all very exciting and well worth researching further. The Director of Research, Professor Darren Griffin, told me that last year there was “an unprecedented achievement in winning competitive research grants, attracting three new academic colleagues, graduating 16 PhD students and hosting three high profile events – the Postgraduate Symposium in July, the Wain Medal Lecture and the Stacey Symposium”.

There are a number of research groups within the School, including the Centre for Molecular Processing (CMP) Group. This group has many interdisciplinary projects, as well as industrial collaborations, such as those with Lonza Biologics, MedImmune and GlaxoSmithKline. This enables students to gain experience in industrial settings as well as in academia, and observe direct applications to their research. The CMP Director, Professor Mark Smales stated that, “A current major research focus of the Centre is to utilise synthetic biology approaches to design and re-design biological processes, and systems to manipulate expression systems (bacterial, fungi, algae and mammalian cells), for application in the industrial biotechnology field. The Centre is a key player in this area, as evidenced by its leading two national networks, funded by the Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research Council (BBSRC), Engineering and Physical Sciences Research Council (EPSRC) and Technology Strategy Board (TSB) in industrial biotechnology.” Projects in this group involve researching “mechanisms and cellular requirements that influence disease states and the synthesis of therapeutic agents, biomedicines/biotherapeutics, and small molecules from cellular systems”. These projects provide more scientific knowledge on important cellular processes, and aim to ultimately reduce the time for therapeutic products to get into hospitals and on to pharmacy shelves after research, development and manufacture.

Another active group, the Kent Fungal Group (KFG), “represents one of the largest collections of fungal research groups in the UK”. Dr Campbell Gourlay discribed his research lab in the KFG as having “a strong interest in understanding the cellular processes that govern the control of cell death and pathogenesis. Our current projects focus upon the molecular mechanisms by which fungal cells adapt and thrive in the face of environmental challenge. Of particular interest are interactions between pathways that are central to a cells ability to respond to stress and control cell death. The lab uses pathogenic and non-pathogenic yeast species as well as human and cancer cells to tackle these issues, and works closely with medical microbiologists and clinicians within the East Kent University Hospital Trust”.

The School has had many achievements with its research. These include characterising forms of the protein myosin found in the heart, creating a computational model for protein synthesis, research into how reactive oxygen species increase ageing in yeast cells, and developing a means to enhance the effectiveness of the drug Herceptin against breast cancer. All of the research conducted here at the University of Kent is worthwhile, and whether you find science engaging or have other interests, research into these areas provide great benefits to the welfare of mankind and may be instrumental to future scientific developments. It all starts here at the University of Kent, with the wonderful world of Bioscience research. If you are interested in finding out more, visit the website www.kent.ac.uk/bio/research/

Charlotte Godfrey
PhD Student in Biochemistry
Le Web 2013 and ‘The next 10 years’

Future trends in entrepreneurship and technology

‘Le Web’ is the world’s most talked about start-up and web entrepreneur conference, taking place annually in Paris and London. To celebrate the tenth anniversary of the event, the topic of the last conference (December 2013) was ‘The Next 10 Years.’

It featured speakers like Silicon Valley author Guy Kawasaki and ‘Nest Labs’ founder Tony Fadell. Topics ranged from digital currency to wearable technology. This article will focus on several speakers’ predictions for the next ten years, and how they believe the coming decade will influence our way of living. This should be particularly useful for aspiring University of Kent students who are passionate about entrepreneurship or technology. What will the next ten years look like in technology and what could entrepreneurs focus on?

Fred Wilson, Twitter and Instagram investor, opened the conference by pointing out three big upcoming trends: networks, unbundling and smartphones. Firstly, hierarchies from the bottom to top will be changed by technology-driven networked crowds. This means that the general public will decide the popularity and success of a product. Secondly, media sources that contain various kinds of newscasts will evolve to focus only on one type of news. For example, a magazine that focuses only on tech will not contain any other type of news. Thirdly, we are all connected through smartphone devices and there is a change, as we know, from PC’s to mobiles. Finally, the four areas for entrepreneurs to watch are – Bitcoin, wellness, data leakage and trust/identity.

The next speaker, Guy Kawasaki, had the following to say to entrepreneurs; instead of pitching, presenting PowerPoints or business plans, an entrepreneur should most importantly build a prototype. This should be done by creating a product that you and your friends want to use, and then hoping that the rest of the world wants that as well. European entrepreneurs should focus on making a prototype that Silicon Valley or Americans want to copy. He also advised that a business leader should not ask anyone, including an employee, to do something that the leader would not do.

According to David Marcus, President of PayPal, money is being reinvented and it is becoming mobile. Tony Conrad, founder of about.me, emphasised in his presentation the importance of networking from day one. “It is important to be innovative, to know the users, and to grab their attention”. His thoughts on future trends? “Everything, and every category, is up for grabs.”

Michael Sippey, Vice-President of Product at Twitter, said that while wearable tech will be big; devices themselves will be more powerful, connected and smaller. “We are living in a shared, more connected society, and this is an incredible opportunity for social media”. Henri Seydoux, founder of Parrot, emphasised the connectedness of everything, including clothes, bodies and wearable tech.

The Bitcoin roundtable concluded that if someone is hoping to make a lot of money with it quickly then it is very risky and not advised. But if someone believes in the fundamentals of Bitcoin and is ready to take a small risk then yes, Bitcoin is of course worth looking at. But it is important to understand that there is a possibility of losing everything.

Technical evangelist Robert Scoble gave five future areas to focus on. These are: the rise of sensors, wearable technology, location databases, and the ongoing rise of social media and data. Also, everything will be personalised, new software will know what we want and will see everything. It will be important to know your customer in the new landscape more than ever before.

In conclusion, Le Web’s ‘The Next 10 Years’ covered many different scenarios of where the world is going and at the same time offered entrepreneurs numerous tips on what to focus on. All the videos of the past conferences are available on YouTube. Hopefully, there are Kent University entrepreneurs who will seize the opportunity and have changed the world already before the next Le Web conference in Paris, December 2014.

Albert Kampe
MSc in Computer Science
Sign to the future

Technology and the future of sign language

Communication is a very important facet of our lives. A notion that is ingrained in us, and plays such an integral part in our everyday lives and in society, it is something we do not often think about as it comes so naturally.

Even with the existence of sign language, conversation between a hearing-impaired person and others can at times be difficult as not everyone can understand sign language. British Sign Language is the first or preferred language of many hearing-impaired people in the UK; with an estimated 125,000 deaf adults and 20,000 children using it. Thousands of non-deaf people use the language also, such as relatives of deaf people, sign language interpreters, or those working within the hearing-impaired community. The introduction of any technology that helps break down barriers and makes communication easier is therefore very exciting.

Interest in this area of research has seen a surge in recent years. A special sign language ring won the Red Dot Design Award last year and consisted of a bracelet and rings worn on different fingers in the style of Buddhist prayer beads. It proposed to detect signing motions and translate them into a voice emitted by the bracelet. It would also translate voice into text on the bracelet which could then be read by the wearer. Some research has attempted to use cameras and even digital gloves to capture sign language gestures but as yet they have not been very cost-effective.

Microsoft is currently in the process of developing a Kinect-based sign language translator to aid the hearing-impaired in communication. Microsoft Research only began working on this project with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and Beijing Union University in February 2012, and so it is still in its early stages. However, a lot of progress has already been made, with the translator prototype recognising 370 of the most popular words in both Chinese and American Sign Languages. British Sign Language is likely to be another option once the project is complete. The idea for the sign language translator came about from the Kinect for Xbox which was originally intended for gaming. The sensors read body positions, movements, and trajectory and translate them into commands with the help of a computer.

Researchers realised that this had the potential to understand sign language gestures and translate them into written text or spoken word. The translator is also able to convert the words spoken by people into sign language in real-time, and is demonstrated via a digital avatar on screen or a holographic projection. Professor Xilin Chen, the Deputy Director of the Institute of Computing Technology at the Chinese Academy of Sciences had already been studying sign language recognition for nearly a decade, and with a special education programme at Beijing Union University providing teachers and student participants, it was a perfect fit for Microsoft Research.

Even though there may still be a number of kinks to work through with the prototype (one being that sign language users sign differently from one another) it is easy to imagine how useful this translator can be. It could make a positive impact on the lives of many deaf and hearing-impaired people who use sign language in a host of everyday situations such as in hospitals, information kiosks, reception areas, and for presentations in meetings. This way, a non-hearing person would be able to effectively communicate with those who do not understand sign language without the aid of an interpreter, thus opening up more job opportunities and a host of other areas not previously explored. With Microsoft reportedly creating its own Google Glass-like eyewear, there are a number of ways in which the sign language technology could be integrated into both current and upcoming gadgets. It is still not known when this project will be available to a mainstream audience, but it is safe to say that it will be well-received when it does.

Maureen Chioma Amadi
MSc in Developmental Psychology

Dates for your diary

Found in Translation
Friday 30 May 2014, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London
Found in Translation is a postgraduate conference for students of literature and related disciplines from CHASE-affiliated institutions. This interdisciplinary conference will investigate the ways in which translation is a productive cultural force.

For more information visit the website http://foundintranslationconference.wordpress.com/

Postgraduate Research Festival
Monday 23 June 2014, Woolf College
The Festival is a great opportunity for postgraduates, both taught and research, to showcase their research to fellow students and staff.

The day will include:
• Poster presentations by students from each faculty
• PechaKucha presentations by students (20 x 20 second slides)
• Inspiring and thought-provoking academic talks
• Panel sessions led by key academic staff
• A drinks reception and awards presentation

Registration opens on 1 April

Find out more on the Graduate School website www.kent.ac.uk/graduateschool
Get involved: boxing

Whether you are looking to get involved in something physical following a day of academic activity, or you are aiming to catch a bit of the glory offered by a sport with a long tradition, the University of Kent Boxing Club is prepared to give you all it has got: just so long as you are prepared to do the same.

Make no mistake, boxing is a physically demanding sport that requires strength, speed, mobility, and most importantly, stamina. Kent’s Boxing Club does well to represent this fact and while each lesson does spend a significant amount of time refining technique, it is the foundations and limits of the body’s physical capabilities that tend to receive the most benefit from the training. Each session varies from week to week although a typical training session begins with a quick warm-up, followed by a segment focused on refining skills and techniques before concluding with circuit training that lasts somewhere between 15 and 20 minutes.

It is the middle segment, where technique and skill are worked on, that makes up the majority of each training session. During this segment, pupils engage in a range of exercises that vary on a weekly basis. By far the most exciting of these exercises are the ones that involve a sparring element, where pairs of students will trade jabs, straights and uppercuts, and combine a series of punches against one another. If this all sounds intimidating to potential newcomers, beginners need not feel unsettled as pupils of similar skill levels are paired during these sessions. More frequently, these exercises involve one pupil holding up mitts for the other to practise their punches against one another. The exercises tend to lack the tension found in true sparring, they earn their right as excellent workouts, as many can readily attest.

Circuit training is certainly the most exhausting part of these lessons, and while few would be quick to claim it as something they look forward to, there is no doubt as to the tremendous benefit it provides to anyone interested in physical conditioning. Boxing coach, Norman Phillips is enthusiastic about the sport and has had 30 years of experience coaching amateur boxers. Tough as nails, there is little mollycoddling from his end, and he expects great things from anyone willing to put in the effort and dedication necessary to become a great boxer.

Lessons are held in the Sports Centre every Thursday and Friday, 4.30pm-6pm. If you have got a gung-ho, never-give-up attitude, do yourself a favour and give boxing a try at Kent; you might just find it one of the best decisions you have ever made.

Jian Wei-Jeanson Gan Lim
MA in the Contemporary

Global Skills Award

Spring Term

Following a successful first term, the Global Skills Award programme resumed this year with a whole host of interesting lectures and useful workshops included in the Spring schedule. Participants of the Award have so far enjoyed lectures on the shrinking of (genetic) male bits, the Eurozone Crisis, global poverty, and the shifting political power in Putin’s Russia, to name but a few. Workshops on areas such as presentation skills, leadership and career management have also proved popular.

Dr Kevin Dutton gave a lecture entitled ‘The Wisdom of Psychopaths’, and Professor Paul Sweeting gave his view on the banks and their role both in the financial crisis and it’s recovery, among other discussions on a variety of worldwide issues. Workshops focused on improving interview skills, preparing CVs or cover letters and networking will continue to run throughout the term. The last lecture of the academic year will see participants have the opportunity to structure their own lecture discussing cultural differences, with some students offering a short presentation, drawing upon their own experiences in various multi-cultural backgrounds.

Hannah Huxley
MA in English and American Literature

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