

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) was formed in 1992 to act as a representative body for postgraduates. We have a sabbatical General Secretary plus fourteen non-sabbatical officers; it is, however, the students' unions that affiliate to NPC which govern the Committee. NPC is constitutionally separate from NUS, but it is not a rival; the two bodies often work together, on postgraduate funding and other campaigns, one recent example being the AUT/NPC/NUS employment charter for postgraduates who teach.

One of our biggest campaigns is postgraduate funding. Some postgraduates are fortunate enough to have their tuition fees paid in full by, and receive full support for living costs from, the Government's Research Councils, but most postgraduates receive no support whatsoever – no grants, no loans, and no support for tuition fees usually in excess of £2,800 per year. NPC believes that one's financial position should not be a barrier to accessing postgraduate courses, and calls on the Government to provide whatever support is necessary to open up postgraduate programmes to academically able applicants from any financial background.

Why is postgraduate funding important?

NPC does its best to campaign for the best interests of UK postgraduate education, but no campaign is effective without good arguments to back it up. Why should the Government listen to demands to improve access to postgraduate funding?

The answer lies with the Government's own arguments – their commitment to move towards a knowledge-based economy. As undergraduate numbers have expanded to take in 33% of 18-30 year olds, with plans to increase this to 50%, a Bachelor's degree is ceasing to become the standard qualification expected of applicants for many jobs. Many employers are now expecting a Master's or PhD as a standard qualification for jobs where, in the past, a Bachelor's was sufficient. Thus, to be eligible for these jobs, one must be prepared to invest thousands of pounds in a postgraduate education – many people simply do not have this amount of money. If the Government is serious about a workforce that is trained to the best of its ability, it must be prepared to include postgraduate courses in its plans.

It is also in NUS' interests to wholeheartedly include postgraduates in its funding campaign. The NPC welcomes all the efforts NUS makes to include postgraduates in its campaigns.

What your union can do

- Affiliate to the NPC if it has not already done so – the more institutions who affiliate, the more effectively NPC can campaign for postgraduates;
- If your union is affiliated, give your input to the ongoing funding debates within NPC. We need to know what you want us to campaign for;
- Lobby your local MPs/MSPs/AMs to sign Early Day Motions to provide better support for postgraduates, or include postgraduate issues within Early Day Motions on student funding in general;
- Submit motions to NUS on postgraduate funding; too often their education funding debate discusses the same issues every year, rarely mentioning the needs of those outside the 18-21 home undergraduate sector;
- Find out how postgraduates at your institution manage financially, and let NPC know – campaigns are more effective with evidence to back them up.

About the NPC

All student unions with postgraduate members are entitled to affiliate to the NPC. Our officers are elected during our four-day Annual Conference in August, which features speakers from many high-profile governmental and non-governmental organisations. We provide information through our newsletter, website, Resource Folder and quarterly general meetings. We campaign by directly responding to papers and policy proposals, working with NUS and the lecturers' unions on areas of common interest. NPC Scotland and NPC Wales exist to cater for the needs of postgraduates in Scotland and Wales; we are also developing links with student bodies in Northern Ireland.

Information on affiliation, this year's Conference in St. Andrews or any other matter can be obtained from the sabbatical General Secretary James Groves, whose email address is npc@npc.org.uk, or from our website www.npc.org.uk.



the national postgraduate committee

postgraduate funding charter



www.npc.org.uk

An end to stealth fees

Last year NUS campaigned long and hard to get top-up fees for undergraduates ruled out by the Government. It eventually succeeded. At postgraduate level, however, there is very little to prevent institutions raising tuition fees to whichever level they see fit. The only influence comes from the maximum contribution the Research Councils will make towards tuition fees, which is ineffective for subjects with little or no Research Council support. Many institutions have liberally increased postgraduate tuition fees as high as demand will allow, which can often be more than £2,000 above the standard annual fee. Overseas students' fees have grown particularly harshly.

NPC believes that the quality of postgraduate education should not be dependent on the ability to meet costs of inflated tuition fees. We recognise there are some instances where a course will only be economically viable if a premium fee is charged, and others where a premium fee is levied principally to supply added value to the students on the course (such as happens with the MBA, for example). The Government should introduce legislation requiring institutions to actively justify the charging of any premium fees for postgraduate courses, with reference to the actual economic cost of delivering it and/or the increased value of the resulting course.

Both undergraduates and postgraduates have been lumbered with progressively higher hidden course costs in recent years, in the form of charges such as library fees and lab bench fees. NPC believes that institutions should be open and honest with the cost of their degrees, and that the tuition fees should cover all academic costs. Failing that, institutions should at least clearly state in their prospectuses the total cost of their courses if this is more than the tuition fees.

Whilst it is ultimately the Government's responsibility to implement effective legislation to limit premium fees and hidden course costs, NPC also encourages individual institutions to keep stealth fees out of their own courses.

NPC supports:

- *Legislation to restrict institutions' ability to levy premium tuition fees for both home/EU and overseas students;*
- *An end to hidden course costs or, if this is not possible, transparent details of all academic costs payable on top of tuition fees;*
- *Targeting the Government to implement this nationwide, and individual institutions to implement this for their own courses.*

Fairer funding for undergraduates

Although NPC is a representative body for postgraduates, it recognises that the systems of undergraduate financial support have an effect on postgraduate students; (almost) all postgraduates were undergraduates once. There are several reasons why NPC supports improved funding for undergraduates.

Many postgraduates start their programmes shortly after completing an undergraduate degree. Unless a student gets support from his/her parents way beyond the level expected by the Government, it is near-impossible to complete an undergraduate degree without running up a large overdraft, which is often carried over to the start of any subsequent postgraduate course. Although the repayment of Student Loans and (if one's bank is feeling charitable) bank overdrafts can be deferred, many postgraduates are forced to extend their overdrafts beyond the interest-free limit because of accumulated undergraduate debts. Often, graduates simply do not contemplate postgraduate education; it is very difficult to persuade a person to forego 1-3 years of a graduate wage to do a Master's or PhD when he/she usually owes circa £12,000 to the Government and/or the banks.

The present system of undergraduate funding is a deterrent to potential students entering higher education in the first place. The Research Councils are increasing their stipends for funded PhDs, to encourage more graduates to start PhDs instead of taking a job; this does little, however, to prevent the loss of potentially great researchers and academics who never entered higher education in the first place.

Finally, there is the worrying possibility that the Government will introduce student loans with commercial rates of interest. This would be especially bad for postgraduates, as every year of postgraduate study would cause one's student loan debt to grow in real terms, with a three-year PhD potentially increasing a student's debt by 25%. It would be counterproductive to the Government's drive to create a trained workforce.

NPC supports:

- *The restoration of the maintenance grant for undergraduates;*
- *Increasing Student Loans for undergraduates to meet their living costs and remove any need to take out overdrafts;*
- *Opposing the introduction of student loans with commercial rates of interest.*

All postgraduates deserve access to financial support

Two years ago, the Government decided to increase the value of its stipends for postgraduates funded by Research Councils from £6,500 per annum to a *minimum* of £9,500 per annum by 2003. It's clear that the Government is starting to realise the value of a trained workforce. But whilst these changes are welcome, this does nothing for the majority of postgraduates who have to fund themselves.

There are ways for self-funded postgraduates to seek support, but none of them are wholly adequate in their current form. The Government allows undergraduates and postgraduates equal access to its Hardship Funds, but these are only available to current students; they are of little use to potential postgraduates, who must convince their institutions of their ability to support themselves prior to gaining admission. There are numerous grants and bursaries available from universities, LEAs and charitable trusts, but these are difficult to apply for, usually heavily competitive, and often cover fees only, not living costs. It is possible to cover the cost of some vocationally oriented Master's courses with a Career Development Loan, but at serious risk; the student must be guaranteed to obtain a job within six months of completing the course.

We believe all forms of maintenance support awarded to undergraduates (through either a grant or a loan) should be available to postgraduates also. Access to financial support should depend on the needs of each individual, not the level of course he/she is attending. Parental support should not be required; nearly all postgraduates are aged 21 or over, and have supported themselves for at least three years, so it would be unfair to expect parents to make further contributions. Clearly grants are preferable to loans; what is important, however, is that the Government covers all students' costs at the point of entry. Any repayments made after the course finishes should, like the current system of student loans for undergraduates, incur no interest above the rate of inflation and only commence when the student is earning enough to afford it.

NPC supports:

- *The extension of the Student Loans scheme to postgraduates;*
- *Any new system of student maintenance support should cover postgraduates as well as undergraduates; and*
- *Repayments on any loans should be income-contingent and incur no interest above inflation.*