

Department of Trade and Industry

World Trade Organisation General Agreement on Trade and Services

Consultation paper

Response by the National Postgraduate Committee

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On behalf of the National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) I am pleased to respond to department of trade and industry's consultation paper on the negotiations for the General Agreement on Trade and Services (GATS). This was discussed at a meeting of the NPC held on 2nd November 2002 at the University of Cardiff from which a motion was passed to put forward the interests of postgraduates in response to GATS. I am grateful for the assistance provided by the National Union of Students, the Postgraduate Society at the University of Bristol and my colleagues Mr Chris Neville-Smith, NPC Chair and Dr James Groves, NPC Past General Secretary and Minutes Secretary.

Tim Brown
General Secretary
National Postgraduate Committee

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Executive summary

Although liberalisation of trade may bring prosperity and economic growth in a number of cases, there are some aspects of postgraduate education that are of concern to us. This response outlines what we do not wish to be committed to the GATS as requested in the consultation paper under the education sector. Our main concerns are the potential threat GATS could have on quality assurance, tuition fees being in a worldwide market and cross border delivery of virtual and distance learning. In the interest of postgraduate research students we have also raised concerns with regards to the research and development sector. Although no negotiations have taken place in this sector as yet, we consider it necessary to raise some points that do overlap with the education sector. Such cases include standards for research degree programmes in supervision, research environment and collaboration. We also identify commercial pressure on research in higher education institutions to place restrictions on intellectual property.

Preamble

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) is a charity with the aim of furthering UK postgraduate education in the public interest. We organise meetings and conferences, publish best practice guidelines and seek to influence public policy on all aspects of postgraduate education. Our membership consists of affiliated students' unions from across the UK; we have one full-time officer, the General Secretary, and fourteen voluntary officers. We work closely with the National Union of Students and the lecturers' unions as well as other bodies relevant to postgraduate education.

Response to the Education Sector

Quality of standards in education, we feel, are under threat where some member countries are favouring generic international academic standards which could weaken standards here in the UK. At present the UK is known for academic standards that are unique and in some cases more favourable to other countries. Both at masters level and at doctoral level there are marked differences compared to other nations which strongly influence the choice of where an international student will study. Such factors play a vital role in the supply of international postgraduates to the UK, which could otherwise change in a liberalised market. Therefore contrary to the interests of other member countries, we do not recommend the commitment of quality assurance to GATS.

At present there is no restriction on tuition fee levels for both home and overseas students at postgraduate level. We therefore see postgraduate education as highly vulnerable to being drawn into a wider market. Commitment of fees to GATS could cause tuition fees to be at international market rates, which may be considerably higher than their present level already set to make profit. With increased fees, there is a possible reduction in current scholarships and studentships available. At the other end of the postgraduate funding spectrum the already burdensome debt from commercial loans will be increased.

Increased costs in tuition will limit the state support that will be available going against attempts from the government to widen participation. Therefore a ring fence on tuition fees is necessary since access to education in order that it continues to exist as a service to those who require it.

A great deal of virtual learning is conveyed at postgraduate level, which would therefore come under the mode 1 “cross border supply” category. As other countries are raising concern over cross border delivery we raise these concerns also. Any education delivered in this mode has risk of being caught into the international market, which would be a disadvantage to virtual learning. At present such modes of learning are considered an economical way of conveying course information worldwide providing a broader access. Therefore it would be important that any virtual or distance learning mechanism is ring fenced from GATS such that an international market would not be a disadvantage.

Response to the Research and Development Sector

Industry, collaborative projects and government funding drive much of the research in higher education institutions. Further funding comes from research students who pay substantial tuition fees to expect a service in return as well as access to a research environment from which they can build their potential to obtain research degrees. Commercial control could have a serious effect such that research units will be drawn to the demands of the international market, reducing its resources to teach and develop research students in the process. Cost of tuition could increase likewise due to the resulting expenses involved.

Commercial control does have the potential to increase the ownership that sponsors will have upon research units and the research students involved. In the interests of the commercial pressure placed on research, an already narrow scope on research would be restricted further. This does prevent the flexibility and opportunity for a number of research students. Further to this, intellectual property rights could take away opportunities from a number of research students who wish to build on what they have attained. A further point to note is that there could be restrictions in terms of collaboration and involvement with the wider research community as intellectual property may have non-disclosure agreements attached.

In order to meet the demands of an international market, research quality is going to have greater emphasis such that the standards of research degree programmes will be disadvantaged. Therefore there would be a greater decline on the already low standards of research degree programmes in many research units even though they may carry out world class research. Quality assurance for research programmes will also have the same threat as that of taught programmes in the education sector. Although the overlap between education and research is great, it is important that some allowance is made to maintain standards and fairness in undertaking a research programme.

We therefore request that the elements of research that have educational value are not committed to GATS. Commercial involvement in research and development within the educational establishments should have appropriate agreements in place that are within reason. This could otherwise affect the supply and potential of UK researchers.