



PiNet Gathers Momentum

Jeremy Hoad discusses the new international organisation...

The *Postgraduates' International Network* is a new organisation to represent the concerns of postgraduates around the world, provide a resource base and share experience between national representative groups.

Originally set up at a meeting in Budapest in 1997 PiNet was formally constituted at a further meeting in Budapest in October 1998. It was then that a constitution was agreed and the organisation was formally established. The constitution can be read at the PiNet web pages and these pages will become the main means of communication for the organisation.

At the October meeting of the NPC we pledged our support for PiNet and committed ourselves to join the organisation. I should also point out a personal interest in this since I was elected the first President of the Postgraduates International Network on the 3rd October 1998. Included here (back cover) is a picture of me "burying a tree" as one of the Hungarian representatives put it.

I believe that PiNet presents a great opportunity for postgraduate organisations around the world to develop closer links. This allows us to share experience and present a strong international voice for postgraduate students in the international arena. Many of the issues and problems facing postgraduates are common to all countries. Funding, supervision, training, teaching, facilities and representation are all things that affect postgraduates wherever they are in the world. Nevertheless there are many different ways that these

issues are being addressed and we now have a developing forum to exchange ideas.

In this article I will outline the projects PiNet is setting up and our involvement with the United Nations conference on higher education in Paris.

Projects

There are two main projects being developed by PiNet, both of which aim to provide a comprehensive resource base for postgraduate organisations and individuals.

International Postgraduate Guide

The Guide will be aimed at individual postgraduates, institutions and national organisations. Published via the internet, the intention is to provide information on the structure of higher education by country and an outline of institutions and programmes available. It will further seek to highlight problems and issues in each country and provide information on comparative best practice. Each national representative postgraduate organisation will be responsible for their respective information and PiNet will coordinate and update this information. Areas for potential inclusion are:

Structure

- general structure of higher education
- research areas and levels
- structure of the PhD
- entry requirements, length of study etc.

The NPC and Me

Jeremy Hoad introduces himself and his role as General Secretary of the NPC

Hello. I introduced myself in a previous mailing but I now have an opportunity to say a little bit more about myself, the NPC and what I have been doing as General Secretary.

Jeremy Hoad in 3 sentences

I was brought up in Perth (Scotland, not Australia) and enjoyed an education at the local comprehensive school there followed by degrees at Oxford University and Newcastle University. For the past few years I have been doing research in human geography at Edinburgh University and am now living in Norwich with my partner Paul Magrs who is a novelist and lecturer at the University of East Anglia.

The NPC and me: then & now

My first contact with the NPC was while I was at Newcastle University and involved with the postgraduate and mature students' society. I attended the first conference held at Edinburgh University in 1992 but little did I know then that a few years later I would not only have organised two further conferences for the NPC myself in Edinburgh (1996 & 1997) but would end up as General Secretary. Actually the first involvement I had with the NPC was at a meeting in Newcastle to decide, among other things, the title that I now hold, so I suppose I only have myself to blame. As well as those stints as Conference Secretary I have also been Academic Secretary and Chair of the Scottish Subcommittee at various times. These were while I was at Edinburgh and also the Postgraduate Convener in EUSA (Edinburgh University Students' Association).

In this time I have seen the NPC grow from an organisation establishing itself on the higher education scene to a respected body which has experience of all aspects of postgraduate life and stands as the acknowledged representative group for postgraduates in the UK. Having said this, at the risk of sounding like a management guru from the 1980s, this is no time to be complacent. Although the NPC is more firmly established now we need to work ever harder to serve the needs of our affiliates and expand our base of representation and involvement. This means taking a hard look at what we can do for our affiliates and becoming a more professional organisation. As ever we face the problem of resources and the tightening of budgets for student unions and associations. Nevertheless the NPC can offer advice, services and

representation that no other student organisation can. This is particularly important as the numbers of postgraduates in the UK has risen dramatically in the past few years, even outstripping the rises in the undergraduate population.

So what will be happening this year? Improving the levels of service we provide to affiliates is a key issue. We are a respected body in higher education now, but what keeps the NPC going is not respect but participation. Without the support of our affiliates we would not exist. This support comes in two parts: the personal support of those who are involved with our work and financial support through affiliations.

Personal support of the NPC comes obviously from the elected officers but also from many others who are involved and provide valuable advice, discussion and time. I am well aware of the time constraints imposed upon postgraduates - family, research, teaching, writing, training and even having time to yourself - and want to say thanks to everyone who can spare some time for the NPC. I will try and make this a little easier by the development of information sheets on postgraduate issues. This will extend our publications beyond the extremely valuable *Guidelines* series and hopefully give people information and advice in a more targeted and manageable form. These will also act as a precursor to the Resources Folder which is in its final stages of development, although this has been delayed by restrictive publication costs temporarily.

Financial support is more difficult to generate beyond what is already being done. Encouraging institutions to affiliate is time consuming but we need to look at other ways of raising revenue. Publications, sponsorship and fund raising events are all possibilities but all need planning and concerted effort. If anyone can give advice on these, please do not hesitate to get in touch with me.

What have I been doing?

The highlight so far has been the establishment of the *Postgraduates' International Network* (PiNet) which is

detailed in another article. Apart from this there has been the usual process of getting to grips with being the General Secretary of a National organisation. This initially meant the hard slog of building up an office for myself and getting a computer system up and running. It has also meant getting used to having my e-mail messages multiplied several fold and advising student officers and individuals. Getting phone calls from the press and being prepared to discuss and explain issues has also been an interesting addition to my working life.

I have met with Oliver Chapman to discuss plans for the NPC Conference 5-8th August 1999. Please send any suggestions to me for sessions and speakers. With John Gray (NPC Treasurer) I had discussions with Chris Haslam, Assistant Director of the *Quality Assurance Agency* (QAA) in Gloucester about the position of the QAA on postgraduate issues and cooperation with the NPC. I have also attended the initial meeting of the *QAA Working Group on Complaints, Appeals and Grievances* working towards a *Code of Practice* to be published in 1999. I attended a meeting of the *NUS National Council* in London. Particular concerns were raised about the age discrimination related to the NUS sponsored London Transport Travel Scheme for students. I took the opportunity to discuss postgraduate issues with Andrew Pakes (NUS President) and Jim Gardner (NUS VP Education).

Following the *NUS Annual Reception* I met with Ewan Gillon (AUT Education Policy Research Officer) to find out what the *Association of University Teachers* (AUT) was doing that related to postgraduates and discuss the *NPC Resource Folder* and the *AUT/NPC/NUS Research Project* on the PhD. I have also had discussions with NUS (Scotland) and the Scottish Office about the forthcoming *Review of Postgraduate Education in Scotland*.

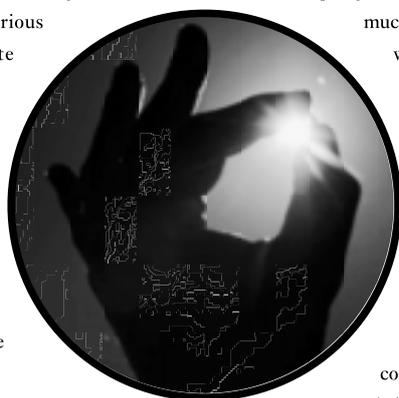
I would like to stress that if anyone wants advice on or to discuss postgraduate issues with me then please feel free to contact me. I can be contacted by phone, email or post (see the back cover for details).



The Future Wellbeing of Postgraduate Communities

Martin Gough's paper, originally delivered to the *Student Wellbeing in Higher Education Conference*

To discuss the future wellbeing of postgraduate communities we need to find the appropriate context and so we must determine our current understanding of postgraduate wellbeing. I suggest, generally speaking, that the wellbeing of a postgraduate community depends upon the enthusiasm of its members to see themselves as a community of individuals with shared interests. Those interests may be realized, paradoxically, through deficiencies in provision in various quarters of the postgraduate education experience, and those common interests and concerns indicate, albeit defeasibly, the boundaries of the postgraduate community as a community. If the deficiencies are not addressed then the community would suffer in the longer term.



The health of the postgraduate community does not simply depend upon common objects of dissatisfaction for sharing grumbles, however. I presume a general thesis that pleasure experienced will enhance wellbeing. It is precisely the pleasure in (particularly) research study that can be an additional focus of a healthy postgraduate community, institution-wide as well as departmentally based. But there are issues which typically concern the postgraduate student. The first issue is **isolation**: individual postgraduates often feel that they are quite incorrigibly on their own, most acutely when they are engaged in unique research projects such as for a Ph.D. No-one is doing the same project as you and so you may feel that it is inappropriate to discuss issues arising out of your research with, say, your peers, even those about which you are most enthusiastic, the successes you achieve. Problems experienced may appear likewise to be just your own. Whilst this sense of isolation may apparently signify a dissipation of any community there might otherwise be, it is also a driving force behind postgraduates finding common problems generally with each other in an attempt to overcome one such common problem that is the isolation. Once more personal contact with other postgraduates is opened up, informal networks can more easily develop. It is then a short, albeit sometimes bureaucratic, step to the formal

conception of an association or society to which postgraduates can belong as members. This could occur within an identified discipline, bounded by a department of the institution. The network or association need not, indeed should not, stop at the departmental boundaries, however. Despite a world of difference in the subject-specific content of postgraduate courses, between, say, Engineering and Philosophy, on examination all postgraduate students will find that they have much in common in terms of their place within their institution and issues arising from it. So a postgraduate community can easily be realized in terms of a formally constituted association across the whole institution, serving in particular social and representative functions.

So the second issue which typically concerns the postgraduate student is **social provision**. There is likely to be much provision for undergraduate run societies and postgraduates are normally welcome to join in according to their interests in specific activities. There is still a need for postgraduate oriented activities and events, however, to supply some confidence that organisers have the happiness and welfare of postgraduates particularly in mind. Needless to say, the best way to ensure this is to have postgraduates organising such events. A postgraduate association is in the best position to facilitate this, in turn. It can also serve the function of **representation**, as in the institution as a whole, the students union and as a co-ordinator for individual departments. Undergraduate representation in this last arena is likely to be geared to feedback and access to complaints procedures in the academic context. The postgraduate need here is the same at the most general level but in practice the specific needs are different, due to the different academic frameworks, and departments may well be geared up properly to the undergraduate market only.

In this context, unique to research study, reside relations with **supervisors and academic accommodation** (in the sense of research support facilities). Many postgraduates have their own desk space and computer terminal in a lockable room, access to their study facilities both in and outside normal working hours, their

supervisor or course leader is available for advice on a regular basis and provides detailed, positive, in-depth criticism of their draft dissertation chapters and write-up reports on their experiments.

Another group by contrast might report that their environment left a little to be desired. As regards their own studies, on leaving the lab they may have to uproot themselves to search vainly for a relatively quiet space in the institution's library. Out of term time they might find it shut in the evenings, on the assumption of a librarian that the students must all have gone home and there is no need to keep it open, with the associated costs. During term time, say, the postgraduate will need to write up some notes on experiments or ideas for developing their project. They settle down on a computer terminal in a public cluster of the institution, thoughts and ideas starting to flow, only to find that an enterprising lecturer has block booked it for an undergraduate class, bursting in and throwing off those formerly ensconced.

Having finally completed the task of drafting a chapter of their research dissertation, they leave it for their supervisor for comments in feedback. After a period of no response, they seek out their supervisor only to find that he or she has gone on sabbatical leave for the semester in some far away part of the world or is currently hopping from one conference to the next and impossible to pin down if they are on campus. Having finally returned the work with comments, the research student may find just perfunctory notes scrawled in the margin, perhaps with a few corrections of written English thrown in, not enough for them to tell how good their work is really, whether or not it is up to scratch. If their work is good then the student may feel encouraged to publish a paper or to patent a design. There are specific issues of **Intellectual Property Rights** to contend with for members of an institution without employee status, rights to authorship and exploitation respectively.

You may be noting that my paradigm of a postgraduate is a research student. There is certainly a more marked contrast with the undergraduate student here, the research study experience being so peculiar. But it

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should not let us overlook what is by some way the majority grouping in postgraduate education, the *taught course* postgraduate student. The place in my schema of this category is more problematic for me but I shall assume sufficient common ground with the research student category to say that the taught course students belong to the postgraduate community, with their specific issues to do with quality and standards of course content and teaching being distinguishable from the issues in undergraduate courses in general.

Many postgraduates find the opportunity, without any compulsion, to obtain some experience (and a little money) performing some demonstrating or **teaching** on courses for undergraduates. There are issues here of support facilities and initial and ongoing training for the teaching work, the postgraduate not being treated fully as staff even in the context of this role, let alone in their research work. If a complaint arises, either from them or against them, should the institution treat them for this purpose as staff? There may be pressure to take on more duties than the postgraduate wishes to do, or an expectation that they will perform duties without remuneration, just for the privilege.

Especially in the context of the duties additional to study, such as teaching work, the postgraduate may experience a build up of pressure upon their **time management** abilities. If they are interested in an academic career, the sort of pressures are good experience for the future but the pressures can and, indeed, typically do affect adversely the chances of meeting the dissertation submission deadline recommended as the end of the “normal” period of study. This sort of deadline (with associated financial implications) is peculiar to research study and students are often thrown in at the deep end and expected to cope with the pressures to which only in time they may be able to acclimatise. **Funding** is, in fact, the last in my list of issues which typically concern the postgraduate student. Those obtaining a grant or other suitable source of income to study are the lucky minority, mandatory state support applying only to the PGCE out of all postgraduate courses. With or without financial support individuals staying in postgraduate education are expected to live on a relatively low, non-pensionable income for some years beyond graduation, with career prospects often unstable at best.

The above does raise the issue whether there is one identifiable postgraduate community at all, since there are so many diverse courses and motivations to study and sources of funding support (or lack of it). In response, I suggest that there are two ways in which we can draw the rough boundary lines around the postgraduate community. Negatively speaking, firstly, we may treat the postgraduate as sitting sometimes somewhat uneasily between undergraduate (definitely a student grouping) and academic staff, in all three areas of research, teaching and administration. The HEI will

recognise the postgraduate as a student formally, and keep them in their place in practice thus when the need may be deemed to arise, yet the high academic standards are expected of the postgraduate in these areas. More positively speaking, secondly, the issues which typically concern the postgraduate student, form a grouping which delineates the postgraduate community, insofar as postgraduates will tend to share these characteristics with each other in significant degrees, i.e. a significant number of the characteristics with a significant number of other postgraduates, even if there are a number of postgraduates who, on putting them in hypothetical pairs, will not share a great deal in common with their partner in the pair.

Despite the isolation experienced, i.e. where the individual thinks that they are alone, that individual is nonetheless part of a postgraduate community, at least in their current institution, implicitly, if not explicitly. I postulate a strong relation, as opposed to a trivial one, between individual and community. A healthy postgraduate community will through its health be supporting individuals, at least implicitly. And the reverse relation is illustrated by that when individuals are failed, such as by lack of support in the institution, the postgraduate community is made to feel “unwell” correspondingly.

The role of pleasure

Mark Southwell & Bill Howe (*Leeds Metropolitan University Students' Union*) presented at the *RAWS Residential Conference* at Durham University (6-8 April) and to the *SRHE Student Development Network* meeting (28 April) versions of a talk based around their “*Unknown Pleasures: ‘sparkles of glory’ that illuminate student activities*” (unpub. draft, April 1998). They adopt the distinction between three models of HEI. The first is the **Ivory Tower**, academic, knowledge-based, for developing the individual intellect who may then go on to benefit society generally. The second model is **Market-Driven**, vocational, skills-based, aiming for explicit recognition of employability in society: they note an aside problem with this model that it seems to assume students are all the 18-year-old school-leaver type, yet to acquire employment-based skills, when in fact the majority of undergraduates are now older and many have work-based experience already. The third model is the “**Mature**” HEI, with more general aims, the fostering of

true understanding, being flexible and learner-centred in its practice.

Their models aside, Bill and Mark are interested in the place of extra-curricular activities, such as those organised through the student union. They warn student development workers against being misled in their aims by the pro-market hegemony. They claim that the motivation to go into, for example, captaincy of the Rowing Club, or into setting up a new student society, is less to do with demonstrating managerial attributes for the C.V. and utility for career purposes but

more to do with the pleasure that is obtained in activities.



They cite some research surveys which confirm that the pleasure is what is at least recollected as the valuable experience. They see this fact as important for the aims of the Mature HEI.

What sort of pleasure are we dealing with here? It is not the immediate sensual gratification type of hedonistic pleasure. It is, rather, a form of aesthetic pleasure, partly perceptual, partly intellectual: “Our view is that the acquisition of knowledge is a ‘revelatory’ process, a movement from the unknown to a ‘reality as yet dimly perceived but apprehended in its ‘worthness’” [Marjorie Reeves (1988), *The Crisis in Higher Education - competence, delight and common good*, Milton Keynes: SRHE & Open University Press), p16], which is unpredictable and individualised. Identification of these precious moments, these ‘sparkles of glory’, is further complicated when it comes to student activities, many of which are undertaken by individuals primarily because of the pleasure and delight they give. We will argue that ‘pleasure’, a sensuous, extreme and autonomous physicality, cannot be sublimated into the values of life skills, employability and life long learning.” [p1] Their opponents would “have failed to ask why do individuals take part. Instead they have tried

to map a value system on to these activities therefore denying the initial desire to take part in the activity, a desire which stems from the pleasure gained in taking part, the pleasure gained from that 'sparkle of glory' when the hidden is revealed, the pleasure from gazing into the divine, from knowing absolutely – deep as knowing goes." [p3] The pleasure is unlegislable or unruly, in that there is no formula for predicting its precipitation, which depends upon the unique individuals in the unique circumstances of their joint approach to the (unique) way an activity is set up.

I suggest that Bill and Mark are correct in their analysis, as far as it goes. The question I ask them, however, is whether, by omission from the analysis, at least, they see a hard grind of academic study as the backdrop against which the extra-curricular pursuit is the enjoyable escape. I would answer for them that they should not see the academic side of student life as by contrast unpleasurable. There need be no conflict between study and pleasure, and it is here that I hold the postgraduate perspective very much in mind. Postgraduates must enjoy their academic work: otherwise they would not have made the sacrifice to embark upon it, having obtained the credibility of graduate status already. If they enjoy their academic subject now then they must have enjoyed a sufficient amount of their undergraduate studies too. It is a fair and not particularly bold inference to make, then, that all undergraduates obtain *some* pleasure *some* of the time in their studies.

I have agreed with Bill and Mark's analysis as far as it goes. I posit two addenda. The first is that we should treat pleasure as criterial of wellbeing. That is, pleasure is not strictly a sufficient condition for wellbeing, since you can be happy at a particular time yet not secure, but I suggest that it is a heuristic test for the soundness of sufficient welfare mechanisms; I tentatively expand, perhaps more strongly, that pleasure is a necessary condition of wellbeing, that those generally unable to enjoy what they do are "unwell". I am concentrating on the postgraduate community as my main concern. My second addendum is to say that student union officers are not often good enough at realising fully the centrality of academic study to the postgraduate experience. It is true that postgraduate students want to enjoy non-academic pursuits too and many involve themselves in undergraduate oriented activities. The point is, however, that the postgraduate course is normally treated by the students as the equivalent of their first graduate career job, so taken very seriously.

The place of the postgraduate community in the institution

Because of the way that courses are run, the postgraduate experience tends to be very department based, at least initially. Many student union officers see involvement in the union as synonymous without

getting bodies into the physical building, meetings often being held there and more use being made of amenities such as bars. The relative absence of identified postgraduates in these forums leads the more cynical officers to say "postgraduates do not get involved – tough on them!" Instead officers should be looking a bit more searchingly for evidence of networking and other activities by postgraduates in their departments as an extension of the workings of the student union itself. The union should then make more overtures to these autonomous activities, and vice-versa. An example would be the high volume of email communications, possible if not actual, between postgraduates. It would be relatively easy to set up more focussed discussion groups on issues of concern for representation and campaigning with involvement from the union without any parties having to leave their desks.

I emphasise again that a semi-autonomous postgraduate association is central to the success of an institution-wide postgraduate discussion and representation forum. It gives the postgraduate community the necessary profile, recognised by the union, yet to be seen as largely directed by postgraduates themselves. It needs a generous budget for all of its activities (I recommend as a ballpark figure for larger institutions £1.00 per postgraduate member up front for an annual budget), patience from the fund-allocators and, preferably, some extra administrative support, perhaps even in the form of a postgraduate sabbatical officer of the union. In return the association will be able to perform many of the tasks seen as essential for the union's list of responsibilities, for example induction, where for postgraduates the traditional school-leaver-oriented events are not universally suitable.

If this is beyond the means of the union then there is a good case for the institution itself to step in, particularly as regards the funding side. It might even take the lead of providing an institution-wide "Graduate School". Such a structure is best constituted with a significant function being to facilitate postgraduate-run activities and representation. The Graduate School is a flexible concept: it may or may not serve also as a touter for external research money for the institution's parts, or be the registry for postgraduates. It ought, normally, however, to take the lead in running the support and welfare mechanisms servicing the issues which typically concern the postgraduate student, as listed in the first section above. This sort of background of support will enhance the pleasure immanent in the individual pursuit of academic study, and hence postgraduate wellbeing. I would insist, however, that decisions made in and for the Graduate School have a significant postgraduate input.

Developments in higher education

I round off with a slight tangent to the thesis above, with developments, arising out of the Dearing Review and

before it (reporting in May 1996) the Harris Review of Postgraduate Education, which are having or will have an effect upon the wellbeing of postgraduates and their communities. It is a tangent particularly because it is neutral as to which account of postgraduate wellbeing we might adopt.

Harris recommended that departments should obtain a *Research Assessment Exercise* rating of 3 or more as a condition of HEFC funding with respect to postgraduate registrations. In this context I would say that the quality of the postgraduate experience in a 5* rated department with loads of postgraduates might turn out to be very disheartening. The supervisor might be too busy, albeit doing good research, and you might feel too much like just one of a crowd of students. A developing research community in a low-rated department, with few postgraduates, on the other hand, might provide excellent supervision and treat you as if staff, in the sense of respect and privileges. I would not like to see departments deciding to opt out of the research process to the detriment of postgraduate research study within them.

Apart from its work on the typology of postgraduate courses and qualifications, the *Quality Assurance Agency* has been developing a stronger *Code of Practice* which will encompass postgraduate study. The National Postgraduate Committee approves of the work here but we are concerned that Taught postgraduate courses do not fall between the stools of Code-governed research study and benchmarked undergraduate study.

The *Institute for Learning and Teaching* has adopted the right approach, that postgraduate teachers should be eligible to work towards accreditation of their teaching. Our worry is that the demands of attaining the first level of status within the ILT are too great within the time period of, say, the period of Ph.D. study. On top of that the first level of attainment should not be seen as merely token recognition, the level postgraduates can attain but not taken seriously compared to lecturer's possibilities. Separately, research supervision is a form of teaching and it is not clear how that can be accredited on the scales of levels of status proposed.

The *Teaching and Higher Education Act* and the *Lifelong Learning Green Paper* provide my final development question. There are issues of funding for and access to study. These issues are raised already for undergraduate entrants. Any problems arising now, three years hence, will be multiplied for postgraduate entry, given current levels of support for postgraduate study. There will be demand for places but the question remains whether the best candidates fill those places. Will they complete their studies or become too "unwell" and drop out? Will some academic research areas be depleted more than others? My optimistic hope is that problems for access to postgraduate education will be met, at least in part, given that we continue to raise the issues.

Mission: Impossible

Nick Bibby looks at postgraduate societies

About once every two years, some bright spark comes up with the suggestion of forming a postgraduate society. They approach the *Students' Association* and some weary societies officer assures them that they are welcome to try, but then rattles off a list of dire warnings of failure and collapse, citing dozens of previous disasters and attempting to highlight pitfalls and problems. Our intrepid pioneers leave such a discussion with heavy hearts but full of grim determination to succeed where all others have failed.

Sure enough, *Societies Faire* comes round and thirty or so postgraduates sign up and promise to tell all their mates. For the first few months everything goes according to plan with events well attended by postgrads of all shapes and sizes, some of whom have even paid their membership fees. Then the end of the year comes along and the committee members start coming under pressure for work from their supervisors. However despite all of this they make it through the whole year — much joy and celebration ensues.

The next year comes round and it turns out that the treasurer was a one year MLitt, and he's vanished off with the books. As though that weren't problematic enough the President has to write up this year and doesn't have time to run the society, but that crowd of thirty eager and enthusiastic members have dissipated like the morning mist as they have all left or are writing up, or are behind schedule, or they're supervisor has been head hunted and they're leaving with them, (the list continues). Anyway the net result is that the society folds and nothing happens until a year later when some bright spark come up with the with the suggestion of forming a postgraduate society...

Now I realise that these problems may not be faced by institutions which have separate postgraduate unions or very large research communities. That said, I am sure that St Andrews is not alone in facing the problem that postgraduates do not have the time to spend organising extra-curricular activities that their junior counterparts have. Furthermore it is rather harder to assume commonality of interest since the range of students within the research community represents a greater diversity of backgrounds and more specialised academic interests.

It was, in fact, just this realisation that provided the key to solving the problem. Viewing the postgraduate community as being defined by what it is rather than what it does had meant that all previous attempts had degenerated into cliques based around certain departments or other social groups. We decided that we



needed something that united the postgraduate community, other than their academic status. Of course the answer had been their all the time: *free alcohol*. With this simple realisation the rest of the process became easy. Instead of setting up an independent society and allowing it to run as though it were the *History Society* or the *Chess Club* or even the *Tunnocks Caramel Wafer Appreciation Society* (I kid you not) the society was created as a quasi-autonomous part of the Students' Association itself. As a result it could receive a grant of thousands, rather than hundreds, and be supported by permanent staff, thereby relieving the burden on office bearers.

The mission of the society also changed instead of "providing a forum for postgraduate students" it would now "Organise social events of particular interest to the research community". This ties in with the reality that PhDs, in particular, often have more in common with members of staff than they do with undergraduates. They are, all too often, teachers not taught, researchers

not learners. Furthermore this approach allows all postgraduates to be members automatically, as the society is not dependant on them for funding. As a result the society has the wealth to organise events which its members may actually want to attend (God forbid), rather than ones that attract the friends of committee members on the basis that they ought to show support for such a worthy venture.

This does not, I admit, solve all the problems; it makes no headway against the fact that the postgrad community does not have an obvious home, but who knows it may in the future. Neither, more significantly, does it make much of an effort in pointing out to the University, and its composite departments, that they ought to be doing rather more for their research students than they are currently. Don't get me wrong, I don't think that St Andrews is any more or less guilty of this crime than most other institutions; all universities seem to feel that all the rewards this hard pressed gang of toiling proto-academics need is a departmental pigeon-hole and the distant hope of an office at the start of the next millennium, or perhaps the one after that.

If we're honest this is the level at which the problem lies; for all to many institutions (and here I mean universities not unions) there is their is a huge problem of defining what the postgraduate community is exactly. They carry an ever increasing teaching and research load but are not treated with the respect offered to staff. However, they are clearly do not share all of the same needs and interests as undergraduates. As the new(ish) NPC poster proclaims so boldly: *there is no such thing as a typical postgraduate* — good point, well made. In the light of that assertion how is either a union or a university to cater for its postgraduate community?

A small number of institutions have started distinguishing between the academic and social requirements of their postgrad community, however even this is not enough. Unless we (both universities and students' associations) start giving support to all students, taught and research alike, on the basis of what they want and need rather than basing our provision on crude academic groupings, we will make very little headway.

Press Digest

Jamie Darwen examines October–November's papers

Postgrad Teachers

Course for postgrads, THES, 13/11/98

The Open University has launched a course to train postgraduate students to teach undergraduates. The university hopes that the distance-learning course will become a key component of the *Institute for Learning and Teaching*. The course leads to a postgraduate diploma in teaching and learning in higher education and is accredited by the *Staff and Educational Development Association*.

PhD Stipends Raised

Sheffield raises PhD stipends, THES, 6/11/98

Sheffield University is to follow the lead of the research councils by raising funding for the 350 PhD students it supports. The increase will cost the university £350,000 a year. Earlier this year the government increased the minimum stipend research councils paid PhD students by £1,000 to £6,455. The extra money, amounting to more than £12 million a year, was provided for in the comprehensive spending review. Sir Gareth Roberts, Sheffield vice-chancellor, said the move was to ensure that all research students were treated equally.

Increase in Fees at LSE

LSE presses case for rise in postgrad fees, THES, 27/11/98

Academics at the London School of Economics have been asked to look again at proposals to increase fees for UK postgraduates. LSE has proposed to raise annual postgraduate fees by about 40%, from £5,500 to £7,700. The proposal is designed to bring UK postgraduates more into line with overseas counterparts, who pay an average of more than £9,000 a year. The students' union opposes any moves to increase charges.

Physics PhD Debate

Physics PhD debate, THES, 27/11/98

Physicists are at loggerheads over whether PhD students should be required to complete a four-year degree before starting research. Four-year physics degrees that lead to an MSci or MPhys were introduced following concerns that graduates were not sufficiently prepared for PhDs. However, some institutions such as Imperial College believe that their three-year degrees adequately train people to do a PhD.

PhD by Published Work

Group's call for a 'third way' towards PhDs, THES, 16/10/98

A third way of getting a PhD should be introduced, according to the *UK Council for Graduate Education*. At present, British students submit a dissertation for a traditional PhD while researchers submit a series of published papers for higher doctorates. The traditional dissertation should be supplemented with published papers, suggests the Council. This combined approach would bring PhDs in line with other European countries. The nature of British PhDs has been under review for some time. Employers are concerned that postdocs lack communication skills and business acumen.

Complaints and Appeals

Student committee bemoans toothless watchdog, THES, 27/11/98

The *Quality Assurance Agency* is "more lap-dog than watchdog" when it comes to policing student grievances, student leaders have claimed. The *National Postgraduate Committee* said that the QAA would fail to fulfil Dearing's recommendation that it develop a "fair and robust" system of student complaints over educational standards. In response to Dearing, the government has indicated that complaints should be an internal matter for institutions, despite students demands for an independent ombudsman.

Northern Ireland PhDs Lose Out

NI PhDs lose out to tune of £1,000, THES, 27/11/98

Postgraduate students in Northern Ireland will receive £1,000 less in basic support than their counterparts in England, Scotland and Wales this year. A total of 345 students are affected by the shortfall. The anomaly has arisen because the *Department of Education for Northern Ireland* (DENI) funds PhD studentships in the province, while the Research Councils fund PhD studentships in England, Scotland and Wales. The Research Councils have recently raised their stipends by £1,000 to a minimum of £6,455, but DENI has not been able to find the funds to match this.

DOCTOR FUN

<http://sunsite.unc.edu/Dave/drfun.html>



Long, long ago on Salisbury Plain – a lively discussion ensues amongst the members of the Stonehenge Planning Committee

Finance

- financing projects and research
- personal finance

Contemporary issues

- current problems
- commentary
- policy section by relevant national organisation

Work and life

- mobility of research courses
- teaching opportunities
- postdoctoral jobs
- relevant laws / rules / regulations of higher education

International

Postgraduate

Database

The Database will be a web-searchable database of research topics offering information on individuals' research interests. Individual postgraduates will be able to enter, maintain and update their own information via an automatic referencing page. Notification to update or confirm information will be sent every six months. Issues of security and access are currently being addressed and individuals will be able to enter personal details and contact information if they wish. The database will be searchable by user-defined key words.

Both of these resources will be published and contain information in English as the official language of PiNet.

United Nations World Conference on Higher Education (WCHE)

Apart from internal business the main matter for discussion was to agree a submission to the *United Nations World Conference on Higher Education*, held in Paris, 5-9th October 1998. This document is available on the NPC web pages and was presented in Paris by Peter Kerey, General Secretary of PiNet.



The UNESCO WCHE was the first time that the United Nations had addressed the issue of higher education in such a comprehensive manner. It recognised that, "On the eve of a new century, there is unprecedented demand for and a great diversification in higher education, as well as an increased awareness of its vital importance for socio-cultural and economic development... Everywhere higher education is faced with great challenges and difficulties related to financing, equity of conditions at access into and during the course of studies, improvement concerning the status of staff, skills based training, enhancement and preservation of quality in teaching, research and services, relevance of programmes, employability of graduates and equitable access to the benefits on international cooperation".

Further Information

NPC web pages: <http://www.npc.org.uk/>

PiNet web pages: <http://www.postgrad.org/> (email Jeremy Hoad, President at: president@postgrad.org)

UNESCO web site

Details of the world conference on higher education...

Declaration http://www.education.unesco.org/educprog/wche/decl_eng.htm

Framework for action http://www.education.unesco.org/educprog/wche/fram_eng.htm

The PiNet submission stressed:

- the right of students to organise and represent themselves autonomously
- student involvement in the decision making processes of higher education
- the dual role of postgraduates as both students and teaching personnel
- the importance of appropriate training, resources and support.
- the role of partnership and cooperation between stakeholders in higher education

There will be a further conference organised by UNESCO on *Research in Higher Education* in July 1999 to be held in Budapest.

Membership

At the meeting in Budapest there were representatives from Australia, France, Hong Kong, Hungary, Ireland, Italy, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, the UK, the USA. Membership of PiNet is mainly intended for national student representative bodies but I would stress that any organisation is welcome to join if they have an interest in postgraduate matters.

Membership is only \$100 (one hundred US dollars).

Contacting the NPC

The NPC's General Secretary, Jeremy Hoad, is always at hand to answer any queries you might have about the NPC or our activities; or to discuss any of the issues the NPC is dealing with.

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You can also contact us directly (and, if you prefer, anonymously) through our web site — which also features information on the NPC, our events and publications, together with an on-line *Postgraduate News* section, and a simple, painless way to subscribe to the npc and postgrad email mailing lists.

Just fire-up any web browser and visit <http://www.npc.org.uk/>