

# 1997 Conference now in Edinburgh!

**Jeremy Hoad** reveals the new details for this year's NPC Conference...

*Well, here it is, Ed-in-bur-gh. ev'ry one is coming here,  
Look to the future now, we've only just begu-u-un.*

(to be sung to the tune of  
'So here it is, Merry Christmas' by Slade)

The theme for this year's conference is 'Postgraduate Futures'. This is intended to reflect the fundamental changes that are likely to affect us in the next few years as Higher Education is taken by its feet and shaken vigorously. With the Dearing Committee due to report imminently and a new era upon us politically (in name so far, we shall see if it is in policy as well) the time for an assessment of the future of postgraduate life is here.

The conference sessions will reflect this questioning of the future but will also offer the opportunity for delegates to share experience and ideas in all the usual areas such as international students' issues, postgraduate societies and graduate schools, taught courses, finance and funding issues, etc. The conference

thus aims to provide comprehensive coverage of postgraduate issues and an opportunity to question the position of postgraduates in Higher Education in the future.

This future perspective will also apply internally to the NPC as an organisation. The results of the Strategic Review of the NPC will offer the opportunity for delegates to decide on the future of the organisation with the aim of providing a better structure and improved services to members.

The Conference details are:

**Dates:**

**Thursday 11 - Sunday 14 September 1997**

**Venue:**

**The Pollock Halls, University of Edinburgh**

**Cost:**

**£130 for full conference registration  
(day rates will be available)**

OK, so what do you get for your £130? Accommodation Thursday, Friday and Saturday, bed & breakfast. All meals provided from Thursday dinner until Saturday dinner, including attendance at the Annual Dinner on

Friday night. And, of course, attendance at any of the conference sessions. A full social programme will also be included.

If anyone has any suggestions for conference sessions these can always be accommodated, so please let me know.

I look forward to seeing you in Edinburgh for another successful conference.



**Jeremy Hoad** is the new Conference Manager for this year's event. He can be contacted on telephone: 0131 667 1971 ext. 2042, or by email: [jeh@geo.ed.ac.uk](mailto:jeh@geo.ed.ac.uk)

**INSIDE THIS ISSUE...**

# Training, Developing and Supporting Supervisors

Jamie Darwen discusses a meeting of the *SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network*, held on 10 June 1997.

The meeting consisted of five short presentations, showing how different institutions have been developing ways of supporting supervisors of research students.

**Dr Stephen Fallows**  
University of Luton

Students have supervisory teams, usually comprising an experienced and an inexperienced supervisor, together with a member from outside the University to provide an external point of reference.

The University's *Research Executive* includes a tutor for all research students, and a co-ordinator for research supervisors. This provides an independent point of reference for supervisors, advisory support, and training and development.

Training provision for supervisors includes:

- an annual 2 day residential (for about 35 supervisors);

- a monthly workshop for supervisors, focusing on key stages in the research degree process, and topics raised by students;
- ongoing support and advice, providing a sounding board for supervisors.

**Professor Malcolm Hart**  
University of Plymouth

The *Research Support Unit* (Registry) and *Staff Development Unit* (Personnel) run programmes for research supervisors. These include three main events:

- training in good supervisory practice for research degrees (with input from current or ex-students);
- training for new higher degree examiners;
- induction for research students, to which supervisors are encouraged to attend if they haven't supervised for a while.

In addition, research students get courses in study skills and training in teaching.

**Sue Clegg**  
Leeds Metropolitan University

LMU runs a *Short Course Accreditation Scheme*, based on models of reflective practice used for professions outside academia. The scheme uses workshops, followed by a period of reflective practice, and then further workshops.

Participants write a statement based on their reflective practice, which is assessed towards an

*Advanced Professional Diploma* in research awards supervision.

**Maureen Skinner**  
Buckinghamshire College

Bucks College has about 100 research students (aiming for 150 by 2000). The college buys in an external consultant for research supervisory training:

- expands supervision experience, by drawing on external expertise and wide sector knowledge;
- tailored to the specific needs of the college;
- incorporates needs of inexperienced supervisors;
- augmented by in-house workshops.

The course uses a problem-based, case study approach, based on reflective practice. Groups include a mix of experienced and inexperienced supervisors, and different subject disciplines.

**Dr Pat Cryer**  
University College London

Pat Cryer is producing a series of guides (through SRHE) to provide support for supervisors. The first two booklets in the series will be:

*"Dilemmas"* by Pat Cryer. This will go beyond codes of practice, by providing examples of ways forward for particular problems.

*"Supervising Overseas Students"* by Eunice Okorochoa.

The *Postgraduate Issues Network* meets once a term and is convened by Dr Pat Cryer. For more information, contact:

SRHE,  
3 Devonshire Street,  
London, W1N 2BA.

Tel: 0171 637 2766

<http://www.srhe.ac.uk/srbe/>



# Postgraduate Typology and Awards

**Robin Jackson** of the *HEQC* talks about one of the outcomes of the Harris Report

The 1996 *HEFCE-CVCP-SCOP Review of Postgraduate Education* (the Harris Review), made a number of recommendations concerning quality and standards. Following national consultation, the *Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals* (CVCP) and the *Standing Conference of Principals* (SCOP) endorsed the recommendations in principle and referred development to the *Higher Education Quality Council* (HEQC). HEQC, whose responsibilities will shortly pass to the new *Quality Assurance Agency*, had itself identified a number of parallel issues and approaches in its *Graduate Standards Programme*.

Work has now begun to build on the review and to identify a national approach to achieving greater clarity about postgraduate provision in the UK. A steering committee has been appointed, chaired by Dr David Fussey, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Greenwich, and including representatives of a wide range of interested parties (including the NPC).

There are three main topics on which the work will focus...

The first involves the development of a structured set of typological categories for the collection of information about postgraduate courses (and a mechanism for the verification of information supplied). This information will provide the basis of a national *Directory* of programmes, with data collection and dissemination to be undertaken by the *Careers Services Unit* of CVCP. CSU has recently taken over from HEBE the dissemination of postgraduate information, which it publishes in directories and on the world wide web.

The second concerns the Review's call for a *Code of Practice* for postgraduate research supervision. It is envisaged that the Code will be based upon the *Guidelines on Postgraduate Research Degrees* published by HEQC in 1996, and the Research Councils have been invited to participate in its development.

The third involves the development of postgraduate awards frameworks, possibly based on a credits and levels, including exploration of ways of harmonising postgraduate award nomenclature to enhance clarity.

The background to the work is the rapid expansion in recent years in UK postgraduate provision (there are now more than 9,000 taught courses and 4,500 research opportunities). This has led to concern about the adequacy of information currently provided for students, employers and funders. In order to improve public understanding, the Review recommended a national Directory, structured on a typology, and greater standardisation of nomenclature, putting forward various suggestions as a basis for consideration. The consultation revealed broad support for the general line of the Review's recommendations, with a number of significant caveats on points of detail and practicality. A strong wish was expressed that any development work should be undertaken collaboratively with the sector and in a way that was sensitive to and where possible built upon existing practice.

HEQC's approach is to work with a project group of senior staff from nine HEIs, selected to be representative of the diversity of the sector across the

UK. This group forms an expert panel that will identify possible ways forward in the light of the suggestions in the Review, the responses of the national consultation and their own current practice. Their institutions will trial options for operational models. Options emerging from the institutional trials will then be widely disseminated and be the subject of consultation across the sector. The work will also involve other groups, both practitioners and users, including overseas students.

The project will run for two years from mid 1997, with completion in time for the 1999-2000 academic year. It is planned to have work on the Directory sufficiently advanced to facilitate the first collection of data in spring 1998. The *Funding Council for England* has recently announced that it hopes, on completion of the work, to be able to use the emergent frameworks to inform its funding of postgraduate provision.

The work is being managed for HEQC/QAA by Dr Robin Jackson and Dr Chris Haslam, and for CSU by Ms Sinead McGovern.

**More information can be found on the NPC's web site at: <http://www.un.umist.ac.uk/npc/>**

## NPC Logo Competition

The NPC's competition to design a new logo, conducted through its web pages and over email, was closed at the end of April. Four entries had been received, but the winner with a majority of over half the votes cast, was the original logo, as pictured below. Clearly some things simply don't need to be changed!



Many thanks to those that took part in the competition, and to anyone who voted.

# Three Cities, a Funeral and an Abduction

**Martin Gough** summarises the past three NPC meetings

It seems like no time at all between the end of one meeting and the approach of the next. Alas, my recordings of the meetings in this column, collated as they are from thoughts jotted in the margins of my flowing minutes, have failed to keep up. But it does enable us to enjoy a retrospective comparison of the last three as we are led onwards towards the Annual Summer Bash.

How different could each meeting be? The "January" meeting, as is often the custom of late, took place a few days into the following month. We were quietly ushered into a space with three and a bit walls, floor and a ceiling, displaying the words "Meditation Room" on the door. Did the venue signify that the *Strategy Review Group* was to try out a new mode of decision-making at NPC meetings? We shall never know how the meeting would have gone under the influences of the subliminal mantras echoing around the room as if from a disembodied source (relaxation tip: with eyes shut whisper "the NPC is good for me" 100 times). The combined factors of one of the highest attendances at an ordinary NPC meeting (perhaps the highest? 33 persons in fact) and there being hardly room in this particular location to swing a brie-and-salad-filled baguette (lunch ably provided by our University College host, Nick Green), and certainly no room for yogic flying, meant that we would have to double up and sit on each others' laps or move to a larger room. The NPC has a reputation as a friendly and welcoming organisation, so the decision what to do was by no means unanimous, but move we did, transplanting ourselves down the road to the venue of the meeting in June last year, a room in the University of London Union.

Matters arising and reports were speedily executed, discussed and accepted, Jeremy revealing that the *Strategy Review Group* had issued a questionnaire for all of us to fill in, the results of which the Group members would discuss at a week-end in an exotic location some time soon. Not to be suppressed he went on to announce a healthy final balance from last Summer's Edinburgh Conference, generated chiefly through his charming diplomacy. We found out that the next issue of the Journal was still enjoying time out at the printers. We paved the way for the inauguration of the *International Students' Sub-*

*Committee*. We enjoyed having a gripe about exorbitant loan repayment rates so much at the meeting in November that we did it all over again here. And all this was before we had a break for tea.

After that Karl Feehan reported his ideas on arrangements for the 1997 Birmingham Conference, being concerned at this stage chiefly that the menu for the Annual Dinner was not yet available. And we got ourselves organised drafting a motion amendment to the *NUS National Spring Conference*. But money matters are never far from our minds. We heard a rumour that the EPSRC might cut studentships to some taught courses and we mused on the perennial issue of liability for Council Tax of Writing-Up research students, first discussed in the slightly different context of the Poll Tax at the first of our annual Conferences in 1990 (showing my age now!). Not all is gloom, however, since we discovered that income tax relief is payable for the fees amount on certain vocational courses in certain circumstances.



The issues of these tax breaks and the latest loans news, and of course Peter Campbell's queries about a minute item or two, plus the still virtual presence of the next Journal issue, figured again in the March meeting (on 5th April), hosted by Sarah Prettejohns in the luxurious confines of the Staff Common Room at the University of Huddersfield. Apart from these items the meeting could not have been much more of a contrast to the previous one. It was cosy but for different reasons to the Meditation Room experience in London. There were only 16 of us present to enjoy both food kept refrigerated and furtive glances across the table in the dim light of a gloomy Pennines day (since the ceiling lights did not want to come on).

This time Officers' reports took up practically the whole meeting, leaving little time for anything else (there was not much that was new). We reaffirmed our impression that NUS Conference decision-making procedure is a tad farcical. John reported yet another Press coup, the relegation of a Vice-Chancellor's piece

to the bottom corner of a THES page in favour of our own by John. We learnt about the new *Quality Assurance Agency*, which could do with being graced by a student representative. And, to round off, we discussed the pros and cons of job ad.'s on our mailbase Lists and wondered whether Crispin, our Treasurer, would stand for Parliament at the General Election on the *No Sleaze in HE* ticket.

From the capital city of England, moving northwards via the Republic of Yorkshire, we made our ways to the capital city of Scotland for the May meeting (on 31st MAY!). We were hosted at Queen Margaret College in Edinburgh by Clare Mortimer and a skeleton hanging in one corner of the room, a reminder for dissenters and NPC officers *sans* report alike that they might be strapped to the chair in the opposite corner with the attachments looking suspiciously like instruments of torture, next to the bed for the ones who come over faint as a result.

Once the meeting got going, there were a number of points which gave us concern. We gave our support to John Gray's letter expressing our condolences to the family of Baroness Seear, who died recently while still in the role of our Honorary President. We could not come to an agreement about exactly how the Executive should be constituted following results from the Strategy Review. Much more work still needs to be done on the *Questions for Prospective Postgraduates* booklet. And, with just six weeks to go officially before the Big Event, we had failed for some time to trace our elected Conference Secretary, who had only given us vague plans eight weeks previously. Had Karl, one delegate mused, been abducted by aliens and teletransported back through time to join eighteenth century pirates in Penzance?

But all is not gloom and angst. Jeremy heroically offered to step into breach once more and welcome us back to Edinburgh yet again for a September Conference instead. We have time to reflect upon our ideal Executive structure. And, after everything, I suggest that no-one could say that NPC meetings are always all the same, either in terms of the host surroundings, the clientele or the items for discussion. Perhaps the variety over the last year will remain with us for us to savour, as it has year upon year.

# the Beginning

ffects on the first year of her postgraduate degree

the literature appertaining to  
ion in secondary schools.  
is has not proved easy and the  
me point, in self-doubt and  
both my own ability and my  
assurance of peers that this is  
nd the support of a supervisor  
or mistakes gave me room for  
exploration. A supportive  
ial safety-net during the first  
n grand ideas have to become  
ect which will prove of interest  
xt two or three years.

st year include: meandering  
trying to find a place to hang  
myself in the literature and  
mpting by-ways only to find  
ly led to a dead end; having  
'ideas' which were total non-  
pers and beginning to speak  
tentatively at first but slowly

a Ph.D. is  
experiences  
ences,

with each opportunity; getting  
inning to see my research as  
s outside myself; learning to  
ccess the Internet and finally  
an academic community.

to mean isolation. Taking  
nding conferences at other  
ng to other academics in the  
gatorating effect. 'Networking'  
d but it is an exciting and

year is the 'try it and see'  
confidence boosting than any

attempt at certainty. After almost a year, my research  
is becoming more focussed. I feel I have done little  
as yet which could be regarded as 'real' research and  
much of what I have done has been discarded. I am  
comforted, however, by the  
knowledge imparted to  
me by those  
who know  
better that  
rejecting  
material is  
just as impor-  
tant as retaining it.

At this point I will  
finish and just check  
the rejected ideas once  
more. Well, you never  
know, I may have  
missed something im-  
portant. Did I say  
uncertainty was a word  
I have come across in  
the first year? I  
certainly didn't happen  
to chance on 'system-  
atic'. Maybe it's a  
second year word!

**Barbara Cole** is a  
member of the KPEDG  
and her Ph.D. examines  
special needs education  
within secondary schools.  
She is helping to organise  
the KPEDG's third con-  
ference, *Published and  
be Dammed* which  
will be held at  
Keele University  
on November 15th  
1997. For more  
information, email:  
[edd00@keele.ac.uk](mailto:edd00@keele.ac.uk)

# The Beginning

Continuing the theme, **Richard Race** looks back

The final year of the research process has brought  
both its challenges, successes and pitfalls. I want to  
focus on three issues which are currently at the back  
of my mind: the writing-up process or bringing  
coherence to the thesis; finishing the Ph.D.; and  
worrying about the future.

Perhaps the  
major dis-  
cipline of the  
research pro-  
cess is how  
well a res-eacher  
controls or uses a vast  
amount of written  
prose. It's all very well  
telling colleagues and  
friends, "I've done this  
much" but how well  
do ideas connect  
together — i.e. is there  
a thread running  
through the literature,  
theory, methodology  
and data analysis? Is  
the thesis balanced —  
e.g. is there too much  
data and not enough  
theory? The researcher  
and supervisor have to  
find the answers to the  
above and other  
questions together.

It is crucial during the  
final year that tough but  
realistic targets are set by  
both researcher and  
supervisor. From  
experience, I found  
setting a provisional  
date for submission  
help-ful, allowing  
me to focus on  
actually finishing  
the writing-up process.

The number of dis-placement  
think up during the final yo  
incredible.

I've heard several people a  
theoretically finish a Ph.D.,  
found the worst advice rece  
process. The process *can* g  
luxury few people can affor  
a supervisor both agree tha  
suitable level or standard, the  
Actually getting to that stand  
but the researcher has to kee  
chapter drafts or going back  
more or clarify existing da  
difference between an MPhi  
personal and financial factor  
of the hardest decisions a res

The 'end' of the research pr  
submission. Preparation f  
begins with choosing an

"Despite th  
survived th  
endurance

examiner. Get to know th  
choose them carefully with  
What happens when the pr  
Some will have lectureships  
very few will have fellowsh  
like to continue my cu  
fellowship. However, withi  
is a tall order as there ar  
actually available within my  
my chances, I have to compl  
into the 'right' journals  
unpredictable of elements: lu

Interestingly, a friend rece  
Ph.D. is a qualification whi

# Diary of a General Secretary

John Gray presents an update on his activities

My time since the last meeting has been largely occupied with two ongoing issues: the conference and the appointment of new part-time staff.

As you will gather from the front of the newsletter, we have been forced to reschedule the conference for September; a substantial proportion of my time since the last newsletter has been devoted to the reorganisation of the conference.

At our last meeting, we agreed to appoint four part-time employees to handle specific projects. One of these will involve the production of information packs which will be useful to students' unions and other parties wishing to know more about the NPC or specific issues in postgraduate education. In later years we hope to develop briefing sheets for postgraduates and others on specific subjects such as graduate teaching assistantships. Any suggestions for other topics are welcome.

On the 3rd June I attended a seminar on the

electronic submission and storage of theses. The proposal is that research students should submit their thesis in electronic format, and that it would be available (and searchable) electronically. This would make access more straightforward than is presently the case. There are still substantial technical and management issues to be resolved; some research presented at the meeting suggested, however, that there might be some resistance from research students to their PhD thesis being too readily available.

Finally, on the 26th June I attended the memorial service for Baroness Seear. We are now in the

John is always on hand to answer any questions or to discuss any of the issues the NPC is dealing with. You can reach him at: Aston Students' Guild, Aston Triangle, Birmingham, B4 7ES. Telephone: 0121 554 5614. email: [grayjw@aston.ac.uk](mailto:grayjw@aston.ac.uk)

process of seeking a successor, hopefully to be elected at the AGM.

Future events include attending the UK Council for *Graduate Education Summer Conference* this month,

followed closely by *NUS National Convention*. This is the primary training event for student union sabbaticals, and I will be hosting a session on postgraduate issues and the NPC.

Immediately after *NUS National Convention* is the scheduled publication date of the Dearing report, which will make interesting reading! Our AGM is only a few days after the publication of the report, which will give us a good opportunity to express our initial views on the report.

The AGM at Warwick will allow us to finalise the changes occurring through our Strategy Review, and will also elect my successor. Next year the impact of Dearing will become known, and any structural changes suggested in his report will start to come into effect. The NPC

will also have a new structure which will hopefully allow us to be more active than we have been previously. If you're interested in the job of General Secretary, please get in touch! I'm happy to discuss what it involves with anyone who is interested.

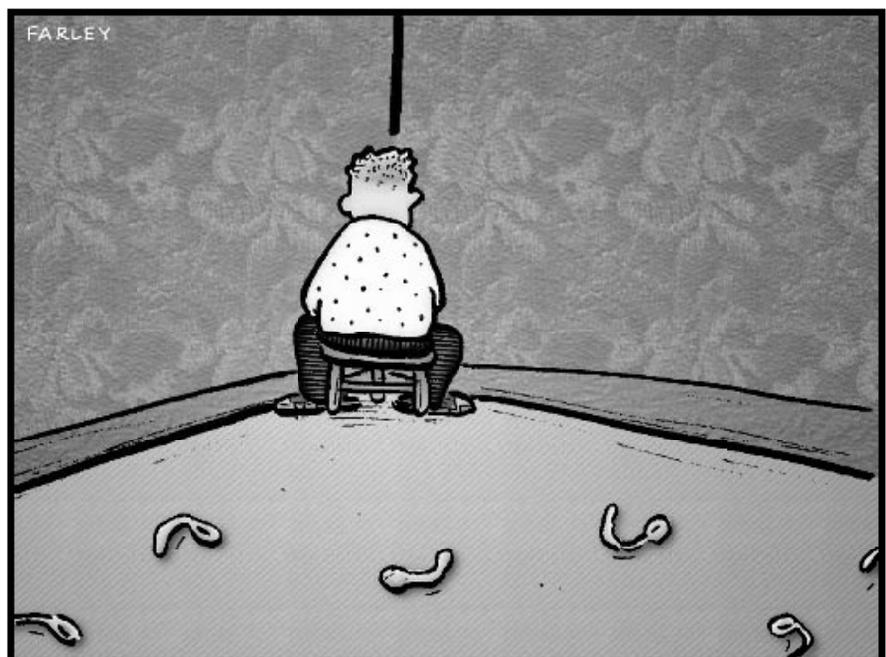
## Loans Update

Bill Hanage gets us up-to-date

Some of you will have noticed that, despite the NPC's misgivings, the Midland Bank postgraduate loan scheme will be going ahead as planned. Promotional literature is already being circulated. As expected, the scheme offers nothing new, being effectively a relaunch of an existing Midland Loan. As before, we encourage all students to think very carefully before taking out one of these Loans, considering in particular repayment prospects. We hope that representatives of the Midland will be available at the NPC conference in September to answer questions from students and address any concerns first hand.

## DOCTOR FUN

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



Young Uri Geller

# Press Digest – May-Jun '97

Jamie Darwen rounds up postgraduate issues in the national press

## **Ph.D. Funding for Elite**

"Doctoring the system", **Guardian Higher**, 29/4/97  
 "Postgrad cash to go to high scorers", **THES**, 2/5/97

Changes in the way PhDs are funded will reward only highly-rated departments. Top research universities are going to get more rewards for their high ratings — snapping up extra cash to teach postgraduates as well as getting the lions share of mainstream research funds for their élite departments.

HEFCE is implementing the proposal in last year's Harris report to restrict teaching and research funding for postgraduate research students to departments rated 3b and above in the *Research Assessment Exercise*. This will stymie attempts by losers in the RAE to compensate by recruiting high numbers of postgraduates and thus develop their own new research groups "on the cheap". Supporters of the move argue that this is unavoidable if the promising next generation of researchers are to be given the best possible grounding in their chosen fields, working with academics whose work is rated of national excellence.

The *National Postgraduate Committee* argues that the further concentration of funding will stifle access to research for mature and part-time students who can only travel to local universities. Making departments comply with a code of practice would be a much better way of ensuring that training is appropriate. Consultation on the Harris review found 90% of respondents wanted a code of practice which assesses both research infrastructure and student support.

## **Dearing Split on Money**

**THES**, 20/6/97

The Dearing committee is divided over funding for research. Its research working group has considered a paper suggesting that research funding should only be provided for departments scoring 5 or 5\* in the *Research Assessment Exercise*. This is in line with the last submission from the *Department of Education and Employment*, which called for greater research selectivity. The proposal has caused a rift amongst members of the committee.

## **Ph.D. Supervision in America**

"Disclosure plea on PhDs", **THES**, 25/4/97]

I include this story on some American research, as it seems equally relevant to the situation here...

The PhD productivity of graduate school professors should be made a matter of public record in the light of the huge variation in the number of students faculty members guide towards their doctorates, says an American researcher. Over a seven year period, some academic staff were listed as supervisors to nearly 20 successful doctoral students, but for others the figure was zero.

Highly productive supervisors shared certain social characteristics. They tended to be more conversational, make better eye contact, were more likely to invite students to their homes and develop long-term relationships with them. They spoke of loving their work, and talked about students in terms of "we" rather than "I" and "they". Roughly half of all United States graduate students fail to complete their doctoral programmes.



## The NPC On-Line

The NPC's site on the World-Wide Web is simply the cat's pyjamas...

The NPC's very own web site features up-to-date information on the issues the NPC is dealing with (including the new "Breaking News" section), contacts for its officers, information on our publications, and details of forthcoming meetings and events. We've also included a few new services, including a Web version of these very *Newsletters*. We're planning to add other new features to the site as time goes by — so don't forget to keep the site on your list of bookmarks and visit us regularly!

You can access the site with any browser — even *Lynx* — at the following address:

<http://www.un.umist.ac.uk/npc/>