

N·P·C

# Conference

**Lancaster University**  
*July 30 – August 2*

This year's *NPC Annual Conference* will take place at Lancaster University from July 30th to August 2nd. The conference is aimed at a variety of people with an interest in postgraduate affairs in the UK, including incoming sabbatical officers, officers of postgraduate associations and university administrators.

There will be a variety of sessions at the conference covering different aspects of postgraduate education, such as access and funding, PhD. vivas, quality assurance, the Dearing Report and research training. Sessions will take on a mixture of presentation, discussion and workshop formats. There will also be guest speakers from organisations including the *Quality Assurance Agency* and the major political parties.

The *Annual General Meeting* of the NPC will also take place during conference.

The full conference fee is £130, which includes accommodation on Thursday, Friday and Saturday evenings, all conference meals and entrance to social events. For people not requiring evening meals and accommodation there is a day registration fee of £25 which covers entrance to all conference sessions.

A registration form for the conference is included with this Newsletter. More details about the conference, including session details as they emerge and further downloadable copies of the registration form, can be found on the conference web site at <http://www.lancs.ac.uk/postgrad/lawley/npc/conference.htm>

Further enquiries can be directed to the Conference Secretary, Scott Lawley, by e-mail to [s.lawley@lancaster.ac.uk](mailto:s.lawley@lancaster.ac.uk)

*We look forward to seeing you in Lancaster later this summer!*

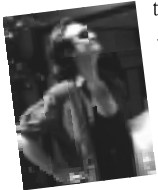
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# NPC Officers and Post-Holders

**Martin Gough** runs through the current list of positions in the NPC

**All Offices are open for election at the 1998 AGM (1st August, Lancaster University).** Nominations for most posts can be accepted during the AGM, although feel free to send advance notice of intention to stand. Alongside brief remits (omitting mention of requirement to attend and report to meetings) of the posts below, incumbent Officers are listed, so those interested may contact them about the nature of the posts and what they have done and would intend to be done in post. Queries may also be directed to the **General Secretary** (full-time sabbatical post, tenable from 1st October for 12 months, does most things under the heading of running the organisation and liaison: see the Diary column in the current issue of the NPC Newsletter for a run through of the year's activities!) — my contact details are given on the back cover.



**Chairperson:**

*John Gray*  
jgray@azuli.demon.co.uk  
0121-688-8897



Chairing meetings of the Committee and the Management Sub-Committee. Ruling on questions over interpretation of the Constitution. Representing the Committee to outside bodies and agencies in the absence of the General Secretary.

**Treasurer:**

*Nick Lipscomb*  
nick@lipscomb.demon.co.uk  
2 Lovett Walk, Winchester



Keeping accurate financial records of the Committee's affairs. Drafting a budget for the financial year, presenting it to the AGM, and advising the Management Sub-Committee on its implementation. Organising and controlling the finances of the Committee and supervising all persons to whom financial administration and accounting are entrusted. Preparation of annual accounts of the Committee for the financial year from 1st August to 31st July, for production within three months of the close of the financial year.

**Minutes Secretary:** *(vacant)*

Taking the minutes at meetings of the Committee (including EGMs and the AGM) and the Management Sub-Committee, and recording voting at these meetings.

**Academic Secretary:** *Reza Shamey*  
ccdms@leeds.ac.uk  
01132-332949



Co-ordinating the academic campaigns of the Committee and remaining informed on academic issues relevant to postgraduate students. Reza, the current office-bearer, also happens to be former officer with remit for International Student issues.

**Conference Secretary:** *Scott Lawley*  
s.lawley@lancaster.ac.uk  
01524-555351



Organising the Annual Conference of the Committee, and other conferences.

**Access and Equal Opps. Officer:** *Ruth Chandler*  
R.Chandler@chibe.ac.uk  
01243-786963

Ensuring that the Committee provides an environment which encourages and enables anyone to participate fully in its activities. Co-ordinating campaigns of the Committee relating to access and equal opportunities for postgraduates in higher education. Remaining informed on issues relevant to access and equal opportunities.

**Comms. Officer:** *Ewan Gillon*  
pm61@dial.pipex.com  
0171-221-4370

Developing the Committee's strategy for communicating with its members and subscribers. Co-ordinating the production of new publications and the revision of existing publications for the Committee.

**Development Officer:** *Clare Mortimer*  
c.mortimer@leith.qmced.ac.uk  
0131-317-3811

Increasing the membership and range of activities of the Committee. Raising money for the Committee as directed by the Committee and in a manner in accordance with Committee policy. Bringing pertinent matters relating to fundraising and development to the attention of the Committee.

**International Officer:** *(vacant)*

Raising awareness of the concerns of international postgraduates studying in the UK, and co-ordinating campaigns as directed by the Committee and in a manner in accordance with Committee policy. Promoting the involvement of international postgraduates in the activities of the Committee. Remaining informed on issues affecting international postgraduates.

**Postgraduate Association Officer:** *Margaret Reed*  
mlr101@york.ac.uk

Promoting the development of Postgraduate Associations in institutions. Co-ordinating the Committee's research into postgraduate representation and the activities of Postgraduate Associations.

**Project Officers:**



*Don Staniford*  
d.staniford@uea.ac.uk  
0131-667-8353

Remit on Complaints Procedures



*Peter Campbell*  
jpcamb0@pine.sbu.ac.uk

Remit on transitional issues from undergraduate to postgraduate study



James Groves  
j.groves@lancaster.ac.uk  
01524-555557

Remit on the general relation of the QAAHE and postgraduates

Seth Atkin  
assmpsq@ioe.ac.uk  
0171-612-6169

Remit on developing equal opportunities issues for targeted groups in NPC who have traditionally been marginalised more generally

*"Up to four Project Officers shall be elected initially without portfolio. Each Project Officer shall prepare a remit for their work during their term of office which shall be submitted to the Committee for approval."*  
...In other words, you can use your own ideas for a project to promote your candidacy, not having to be the same as the chosen ones here above.

**MSU Liaison Officer:** Margaret Davine  
margaret.davine@edexcel.org.uk  
0181-863-3675



(nominations from the Mature Students Union)

#### Ordinary Elected Members: (without portfolio)

Richard Ballerand  
r.ballerand@bcsu.bbk.ac.uk  
0171-351-1776

Jeremy Hoad  
jeh@geovax.ed.ac.uk  
0131-667-1971 x.2042

(who also happens to be Chair of the Scottish Subcommittee, of which all delegate members and NPC executive officers from Scottish institutions are members)

**Honorary President:** (vacant)

**Honorary Vice-Presidents:** (vacant)

#### Other Subcommittees

##### Communications Subcommittee:

Ewan Gillon, Martin Gough, Richard Ballerand, Clare Mortimer, Peter Campbell, James Irvine (as Managing

Editor of *The Journal of Graduate Education*, j.m.irvine@strath.ac.uk), Andrew Green (as *Publications Assistant*, andrew@article7.co.uk)

##### Constitutional Subcommittee:

John Gray, Martin Gough, James Irvine, Crispin Allard, Ewan Gillon

##### Financial Subcommittee:

Martin Gough, John Gray, Nick Lipscomb, Peter Campbell, James Irvine, Crispin Allard (crispin@antiphon.demon.co.uk)

##### Conference Sub-Committee:

Scott Lawley, Martin Egan, Martin Gough, Nick Lipscomb, Jeremy Hoad

##### Access and Equal Opportunities Subcommittee:

Ruth Chandler, Margaret Davine, Martin Gough, Martin Egan, Karen de Jong (01273-678152), (International Officer)

##### Development Subcommittee:

Ruth Chandler, Martin Gough, Clare Mortimer, Margaret Reed, plus *Regional Representatives* (for linking the Committee with institutions in their regions, arranging visits, etc.):

*Northern Ireland:* (vacant)

*Wales:* (vacant)

*South West:* Jon Wilson  
jpw@maths.bath.ac.uk  
01225-826826 x.5495

*South East:* Martin Egan  
m.egan@gre.ac.uk  
0181-3325372

*London:* Carlyne Culver  
NUS, 461 Holloway Road, London

*East Anglia:* Rowan White  
r.m.p.white@uea.ac.uk  
01603-592545

*East Midlands:* Simon Parish  
simon.parish@ntu.ac.uk  
0115-9418418 x.3351/3048

*West Midlands:* Hannah Quirk  
in5451@wlv.ac.uk  
01902-321522

*North West:* Karl Dayson  
k.t.dayson@sociology.salford.ac.uk  
0161-295-1524

*North East:* Margaret Reed  
mlr101@york.ac.uk

...plus

**Electronic Mailing:** Jamie Darwen

**List Administrator:** npc-request@mailbase.ac.uk

## Goodwill Hunting

Richard Race discusses part-time lecturing

The education media have recently highlighted the plight of part-time lecturers within higher education. We have seen several examples of individual academics who are working in one or more university departments, one or more universities, or a combination of both. Because of the financial difficulties of the education market (being felt throughout all levels of the education system) on university departments, the part-time lecturer/tutor is becoming a more visible part of university life. The hunt for a full-time lectureship within academia is increasingly becoming more difficult.

The advantages of being a part-time lecturer/tutor I would suggest are threefold. Firstly it offers a gateway into academia for lecturers of all ages; secondly, it provides an element of freedom and independence from internal departmental politics and thirdly, it enables academics the opportunity to be flexible i.e. being able to teach in different departments and universities.

However, the disadvantages far outweigh the advantages. A part time lecturer has minimal contact with colleagues and hardly any job security. The part-time 'contract', so to speak, is a verbal rather than a written one. The money involved is perhaps the most obvious and contentious issue. The most important issue, I feel, regards lecturer/student contact time. At one level, I believe it makes a big difference to a student to be able to see and talk to his/her lecturer or tutor within the university. At a more significant level, I believe part-time lecturers/tutors — e.g. an individual on campus for one or two days per week, will have minimal contact time through office hours which is to the detriment of both teacher and student.

There is also a major issue concerning part-time staff identity. One of the reasons why academics of all ages become part-time is because it gives the individual a sense of belonging. Have you ever thought about going to an academic conference, giving a paper and not actually be affiliated to a university? However, is identity or this sense of belonging enough as we approach the twenty-first century for part-time lecturers/tutors? Somebody recently suggested to me that many departments are running on goodwill, with individuals giving up their time for no payment to become involved in various activities or taking on extra responsibilities. Is it enough to suggest that part time lecturing and tutoring is simply a consequence of the education market of the 1990s?

Perhaps the NPC needs to further address, discuss and campaign for more education rights regarding the position of part-time lecturers and tutors — for the simple reason that more postgraduates are facing up to the challenge and problems associated with moving into academia as part-time staff: the question which affects not just part time lecturers/tutors but universities (and, most importantly, students) is how long this 'goodwill' can last?

# Diary of a General Secretary

Martin Gough reveals what he's been up to in his sabbatical year with the NPC...

## August & September

One of the warming things about the job of NPC General Secretary is that it starts early. Your popularity is increased, your services being in demand from soon after your election, well before the official start date of the beginning of October! We must never overlook the significant contributions, often beyond the call of duty, of volunteer officers, without whom the sole General Secretary would flounder. A good example is the Conference organiser and a good team of people he pressganged into running workshops and discussion sessions last September in Edinburgh. Now I think of it, I did a fair bit in that capacity myself, although I would not have wanted it any other way (except to be without a persistent cough I picked up from August heatwave London traffic smog)... No rest: the *NPC Conference* ended on the 14th September; on the 15th I attended the *Education Gathering Meeting* at Leeds Metropolitan University, a forum for Education Researchers in Students' Unions (Leeds having been declared officially Britain's most polluted city at that time). For the rest of the month, I set about attempting to make arrangements for the office of a national organisation to be plonked into my home.

## October

1st of the month: early hours of the morning, and the job officially started, celebrated with a late night email to the mailbase list. October saw the arrival of the physical office picked up in a round trip to John Gray's in Birmingham, via Milton Keynes for my first visit to a conference on post-Dearing issues. The house is hardly prepared but the cough seems to be wearing off. Two more post-Dearing conferences before the end of the month; and I could have gone to more. I did get to Birmingham University to address the annual meeting of the *National Committee for Philosophy*, by way of testing the water for interest in our work amongst the world of professional academic bodies. And I attended the *SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network* meeting the previous day in London: again the theme was skills for careers. The infamously gruelling *Executive "Training Weekend"* might have been arranged half way through the month but kept being put back. Surely the delay in finalising it could not have anything to do with the advertised programme, including having to keep ourselves warm overnight on the peaks of Grampian mountains with just a handful of plastic bags, followed dressing up in khaki in a wood and being bombarded with high velocity paintballs?

## November

A wild few days in early in the month, including an invitation to a firework night party, was the setting of my John Shuttleworth style tour of the Nottingham area (500 bus stops...), in search of postgraduates. I found some indeed, including on the way back via Sheffield. More conferences followed. *Newsletter* regular Richard Race has a postgrad group at Keele which hosted one on publishing. The Mature Students Union went to Eastbourne for theirs. It beat our Conference hands-down in certain respects, namely in the booze and smoke departments, and that is not to say that ours was in any way abstemious. I rush off a piece on part-time study for CSU's *Postgrad Update*, my only dabbling in the Press to date apart from telephone interviews and a letter printed in the *Guardian Higher* last month on research degree appeals, before our own long-anticipated *Executive Training Weekend*, which graced the end of the month. The main problem was that I organised it: hmm, perhaps I should expand, i.e., I spent half the time running around after refreshments and doing photocopying rather than enriching sessions!

## December

...sees two major events. As a team of NPC *cognoscenti* we ran workshops at the *NUS Postgraduate Representation Day* at Birmingham University, aimed at SU Sabbaticals, most of whom sent postgraduates along instead. And then there was the small matter of the main NPC meeting, hosted in a plush "Board Room" on the 13th by the Nottingham Trent postgrads, whom I had persuaded when I met them at the start of November. There was plenty of lovely food but Campus Security had decided to lock the gates to deny car travelling delegates an easy passage and, alas for one delegate, there was no television to watch. We zoomed through the meeting business, and secured more keen people to occupy the vacant Executive posts, but still had to rush the final items (we just enjoy these occasions too much): reflecting on the *Executive Training Weekend*, considering International postgraduate initiatives and graduate teaching assistants, sorting out the correct scheduling of induction programmes, mourning the missed opportunities of a decent loans scheme, and preparing ourselves for the Dearing aftermath. The last main meeting having been on 13th September, constitutional buffs will have spotted that this last one was not a day too soon to satisfy the requirement that it take place within three months. Phew! Now I might take things easy, to get enough rest, for the next week or so, which just happens to take us up to the Christmas break!

## January

A break it certainly was, but useful also for catching up myself on the H.E. press for the last few months, something I had judiciously left to others about which to inform me! The major happening of January was a speedy 3-day tour of a section of the South-East of England, with the main mode of transport being the train, so upgraded from my bussing adventure in Nottingham, furthermore hosted and guided efficiently by Ruth Chandler. We managed two meetings with Sussex University people, one with Sabbatical staff and one with postgraduates (arranged by Karen de Jong), and another one there as the inaugural face-to-face *Access & Equal Opportunities Sub-Committee* meeting, serving to set the agenda in this area, I anticipate, for a while to come. Just over the railway line we caught up with sabbaticals at Brighton University, who over lunch expressed interest in our work. On the way back up North via London I honoured an invitation for a quick pint and a chat with the newly qualified (i.e. affiliated) Surrey University postgrad group. We were based at Chichester and ran (with Margaret Davine) a good-supervision-and-other-bits-and-pieces-in-light-of-Dearing workshop, with a mixed group of research students, supervisors and student union officers at the Institute, who wine and dined us in the evenings. I even managed to squeeze in a few words to the Postmodern Studies research group on the importance of non-linguistic ontology in a spare moment. I do recommend that next year's NPC Officers have a go at organising such a tour of their area, whether or not they try to host an Officer from further afield! My intuitions that we get an unfair press as regards the value of being a postgraduate in the context of suitability for careers gets a boost from my participating in a Careers Service workshop at University of Leeds. Views on this are welcome: are we just embedded irredeemably in the ivory tower cast?

## February

I had a meeting with an editor on the quarterly magazine *Trans World Education*, which provides a guide to H.E. and similar courses around the world. They are launching a section, *International Graduate*, as an expanded and separate supplement, for which I accepted the (honorary) position of Consultant Editor. It should be a good way to inform prospective International Students about UK postgrad education issues and the NPC as well. The NPC apparently having slipped off the NUS mailing list, and so missing a National Council last November, I was reliably but informally informed about the one on 17th at Birmingham University. Two days later saw me at another

*Education Gathering Meeting* at Lancaster University. The heat on the Teaching and Higher Education Bill was stepped up for the end of the month, the 25th seeing me on the platform, with a few minor celebrities not unused to the stage, in the Grand Committee Room of the House of Commons, at the Lobby of Parliament concerned about student debt, at the end of the day before we were chucked out, explaining as quickly as I could why debt would probably hit postgraduate studies worse than anything else; even after then I managed to meet my MP! The day before saw me honour the tradition of the General Secretary getting their mugshot in the national press some time in the year, with a photographer coming round at a couple of hours notice, for publication alongside a report on the Bill for the following Friday's *Times Higher*. I had set up most of the interviews staged in the previous issue. The month ended the next day with another NPC ordinary meeting (yet another event at Birmingham University!). The Bill dominated the debating time for the meeting and many agenda items (*Research Assessment Exercise, European Social Fund*, the Writing-Up period of study) received little, if any, coverage, although we did manage to sort out our position on how postgraduates could be accredited for the teaching work they do in HEIs, and also on how much we would allow of undergraduate level work in Masters degrees as regards the *QAAHE Postgraduate Project*.

### March

The first week sees me grappling with the officialese of my first attempts at drafting NPC responses to consultation exercises, with the deadlines practically upon me, for the issue of Accreditation of H.E. teaching and for the next *Research Assessment Exercise*, squeezing in another trip to the London based *SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network*, meeting this time on research supervision of remote students. The campaign to highlight postgrad issues in the *Teaching & H.E. Bill* occupies most of the month, sending briefings off to the Press and to Lords and MPs who would be interested, including giving my own MP another interview. The end of the month sees me rushing off more submissions, to the *Commons Select Committee* on access to post-16 education, and to the *Social Security Advisory Committee*, since the DSS threaten to remove postgraduates even more out of the benefits system. I did manage to honour a visit over lunch to Leicester City Campus of De Montfort University, and to drop in to Leicester University later on in the day, and to be a not quite entirely submerged postgrad presence at *NUS Conference* in Blackpool.

### April

Early in the month Jamie Darwen and I brushed the cobwebs off the NPC crystal ball for running a session on "*The Future of [and quite a few other bits and pieces on] Postgraduate Education*" for the *Research & Welfare Staff Residential conference* held at Durham University. But

most of the activity was concentrated in the last few days of the month. I attended a further Education Gatherers' meeting on the *Lifelong Learning Green Paper* at Sheffield Hallam University; dropped in on the *Mature Students Union* Spring Conference, held at the grand haunt of trades union groups, Wortley Hall, near Sheffield; while taking in attendance at another SRHE event, made another trip to London to chat up the guys at NUS and meet up with more Press people. I sorted out my Foreword for the inaugural issue of *International Graduate*, wrote two pieces for publication next month on the Web-based *Science's Next Wave*, one on Postgraduate Networks for a "Student Power" theme, and a shorter piece entitled "*What the Government has done for Postgraduates*"; plus a promotional piece on the NPC for the new De Montfort University bulletin, *Research Matters*. Martin Gough, 23, journalist, has even been quoted on the subject of women who have plastic surgery in the "*What do men really think about...*" column in a recent issue of the *Express on Saturday Magazine* (at least they got my age right). At the same time, of course, I am not neglecting my moonlighting activities of printing letters and stuffing and sticking down envelopes for the timely mailing in advance of the upcoming NPC meeting!

### May

This month sees the first ever attempt, outside the Conference, to stage a weekend of events/meetings around the requisite ordinary meeting, rather than have the standard day-trip and Saturday afternoon mad rush through discussion items with hardly the time to see who is there. The weekend of 15th-17th was organised efficiently by the postgraduate guild officers at the location of Bath University, starting with people drifting into the bar as the Friday evening rolled on, culminating in the cultural delights of the student union sweatbox. But I am sure that we were all preparing mentally for the on-line information session first thing the next morning, followed by the main meeting in the afternoon. Unfortunately most of those attending were not able to stay beyond the main meeting anyway, so they did not get the best out of the weekend, especially since too many Officers' reports dragged on a tad, much of the rest being discussion aimed at helping me draft the next round of consultation paper responses or noting ones I had already done. I think that NPC Chair John Gray and I have mixed feelings about the setting, an amphitheatre-style lecture room such that all the delegates could look down with menace on just us two, rather than the circle or square of tables format. But some of us did manage to get some collective thinking done outside this meeting, and hit the town on the Saturday evening, being very careful indeed not to be seen consuming any liquid substance in the streets. So as not to allow myself too relaxing a time in making preparations for paperwork leading up to the weekend, I took the opportunity to do a round trip initially via London, getting the early train down on Tuesday morning to attend an *NUS National Council* that never was (not enough people present) at London University Senate House, and to speak

the next day at the repeat version of the "Bin the Bill" Lobby of Parliament only to fall off the end of the agenda (but another such event is planned). My round trip continued with a westerly start of a tour of the South-West, visiting Plymouth University and the College of St Mark & St John via more bussing around, before the descent upon Bath. The aftermath of the meeting left me again with two responses to consultation papers to draft with an immediate deadline, one on the structure of the proposed Institute of Learning & Teaching in H.E., the other issued by the Quality Assurance Agency. The end of the month sees me visiting London again. I have got myself on to a working group set up by the UK Council for Graduate Education to look at the training of postgraduates to teach in H.E. It met in the West Library of the Athenaeum Club, Waterloo Place, SW1, the sort of place where you may be incarcerated and shot at dawn if you omit to be wearing a tie; I was roundly ticked off by the regaled porters for having removed even my jacket! I am also accepted on to the HEFCE Quality Assessment Committee and was due to meet the convenor later in the day but she had to cancel for the time being. Back home then to sort out some editing suggestions on the NUS booklet on postgraduate funding and tracking down a supplier of cartridges for our printer.

### June

I just cannot keep away from London. The third Lobby of Parliament was scheduled to coincide with the day of the Final Reading in the Commons of the *Teaching & H.E. Bill* on 8th and I got my follow-up speech in this time, alongside the stupendous official garb of a number of student association officers from Scottish institutions. The next day I honour the invitation to sit on the Consultative Forum of the *Planning Group of the Institute of Learning and Teaching in Higher Education* (ILTHEPGCF, I suppose). At the end of the week I take the opportunity to do a quick tour of the Liverpool area, prising Don Staniford from his schedule at the time in this part of the world, to visit three HEIs for the benefit of postgraduates therein (by the way, ask Don about his theory on the election of women to sabbatical posts). I step up my hobnobbing with another trip to London on the Tuesday following for the next *SRHE Postgraduate Issues Network*, meeting this time on postgraduates as teachers. I was due to meet a MP spokesperson for H.E. after then but they cancelled at the last minute. My attempts to meet up with people, Peers of the Realm, journalists, student union officers met with no success until the very end of the next day when I found SOAS people willing to chat. I squeezed in a visit just before a pre-arranged date with the Summer Reception of the *Standing Conference of Principals*. I managed to get in a word or two in conversation about ensuring standards of and access to postgraduate education, including with someone called Tessa Blackstone, who had addressed the gathering. I'm sure I'll return again soon but I hasten back to step up a gear the preparations for our annual conference and AGM.

# “Structure” in the Second Year of the PhD

**Barbara Cole** argues that a little self-flagellation does you good...

Last year I wrote an article for the *NPC Newsletter* about the experiences of being a first year Ph.D. student and was grateful for the kind comments I received from some of the readers. The article considered the definition of the word, ‘research’ and my inability to find any ‘structure’ within the first year research process. I concluded that ‘structure’ must be a second year word. Well, I am delighted to report, it is! I have at last found a semblance of it creeping into the process. No doubt this is in part due to vigilant supervision but I feel that I must take some of the credit for the appearance of order. I have begun to wield my own stick! No carrots; just sticks; big sticks, or ‘conferences’ as they are otherwise known. It is quite amazing how concentrated the mind becomes when a conference is looming large for which a paper has been submitted but not yet written.

One of the problems of the second year is that the reading, although still ongoing, slows down and the real research and ‘writing’ must begin. Now there is a word to bring trepidation to the heart of even the most intrepid researcher: ‘writing!’ How many excuses can you think of to avoid doing it? Don’t even try; they have all been thought of before. Dogs, cats, budgies, piranhas, crocodiles and koala bears, have all been blamed in turn for the consumption of pens, paper, articles, documents and even theses. The pains of producing a piece of written work for perusal by one’s supervisor are worse than the pangs of childbirth (and I speak as one who knows!). However, when the written work takes the form of a paper submitted at a national conference, a critical assessment of the contents by a friendly supervisor, seems not only desirable but essential. It is amazing how kind supervisors can be once they realise that you’re about to throw yourself, willingly, into the lion’s den. The shock that you are actually chasing them round the university, written work in hand, waving to them frantically to ‘please’ read your paper, has a softening effect on them. But how does this all fit with the notion of ‘structure’ and big sticks?

Well, having secured a life-long right to the third chair on the left in the library, it is time to leave the

literature and go forth. One very good place to go forth to, is a postgraduate conference, where like minded souls have also gone forth. A postgraduate network exists out there and I do seriously advocate attending some of the conferences. The first one can seem daunting, but I do assure you that there is a definite sense of a postgraduate community and you will soon be made to feel at ease. These conferences are the ideal venues for trying out research ideas, for discussing methodological issues and problems, for sharing research experiences and hearing about the latest research. The keynote speakers are always experts in the particular field and their interest is a great morale booster.

I have submitted abstracts for three very different conferences this year, all of which require me to move my own research forward in order to be able to present the papers. (This is where the self-flagellation comes in) The conferences I am attending are spaced out during the year and represent different aspects of

the research process. The presentations represent only a fraction of the real work done for the paper and the wonderful words of your supervisor, that you can get three or four chapters for your thesis out of the paper, make it worth the sweat and tears. Taking your work away from your desk and presenting it to others of a like mind, is tremendously rewarding and does begin to acclimatise you to being questioned about your work in preparation for the great day!

I feel justified in claiming that I have begun to develop a framework for my research: yes the word ‘structure’ has been found and utilised. Networking at selected conferences; listening to others present papers and presenting your own research, however incomplete it might be (you’ll be surprised at the warmth of the response) are invigorating and revitalising. It’s very good for one’s confidence to go forth and present — and who knows, after one conference you may never need to self-flagellate again; it could be carrots all the way!

## DOCTOR FUN

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



Long ago on Salisbury Plain — a lively discussion ensues amongst the members of the Stonehenge Planning Committee.



# Press Digest

March – May 1998

## *Interdisciplinary Training*

**“Year of Living Diversely for UCL Postgrads”**  
**THES, 13/3/98**

PhD students at University College London are to be given a helping hand under a scheme offering them a true interdisciplinary training and the funds to afford it. UCL is funding a number of its postgraduate students to spend a year of study, on top of the normal three years needed for a PhD, within a UCL department away from their primary area of research.

## *Shortage of Research Students*

**“Down on Business”**  
**Guardian Higher, 17/3/98**

UK students are turning away from postgraduate degrees in economics, business studies and politics, forcing universities to recruit students from overseas. The dearth of home-grown applicants for PhDs in economics in particular has prompted the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) to launch an investigation into the falling numbers of UK research students. A central concern is that the lack of PhD students will mean far fewer economics researchers in UK universities in the future.

**“Trouble at the Top”**  
**Guardian Higher, 21/4/98**

Dwindling numbers of top students embarking on scientific careers, under-investment in laboratory equipment and poor collaboration between different disciplines pose some of the greatest threats to the country's research effort, according to an analysis prepared for the government's comprehensive spending review.

This reveals declining reserves of future researchers in key scientific areas as a major concern. The Biotechnology and Biological Sciences Research

Council (BBSRC) warns that the country will squander any chances of exploiting the burgeoning biotechnology and pharmaceuticals industries if the number of PhD students fails to match the growing demands of companies. “Doctoral training does not offer sufficiently attractive stipends to bring some of the best intellects of coming generations into the sector,” the report says. The BBSRC has been disturbed by a fall in the numbers of students with top grades embarking on PhDs.

## *Research Training*

**“Postgrads Pinpoint Study Gaps”**  
**THES, 17/4/98**

Nearly half of former PhD students believe their research training should have been more structured, while four out of ten research council postgraduates would have liked more training to prepare them for employment. A survey, conducted on behalf of the Office of Science and Technology, reveals the career structure and progress of research council postgraduates who completed courses between 1987 and 1989.

## *Accreditation for Supervisors*

**THES, 15/5/98**

The BBSRC has commissioned an accreditation scheme specifically for its research supervisors. Previously it has always been assumed that anyone with research expertise could not only teach but supervise research. Pilot courses are being tried at a small number of BBSRC sites as the standard is developed by the Staff Educational Development Association.

## *Thesis Submission Rates*

**“Time to Submit”**  
**Guardian Higher, 5/5/98**

Medical research students are finding it increasingly difficult

to finish their PhDs within four years, let alone before their three-year grants run out. Only two in five students supported by the Medical Research Council managed to write up within four years after starting doctorates in 1992, which is half as many as those supported by some other research councils. The figures are likely to add pressure on the council to impose sanctions on university departments which experience consistently bad submission rates.

## *Research Council for Arts*

**“Arts Research Council on Way”**  
**THES, 24/4/98**

The first step towards a research council for the arts has been taken, with the announcement of an Arts and Humanities Research Board. Money from HEFCE and the Department for Education Northern Ireland will help set up the board, which will not include Scotland or Wales. It will build on the work of the British Academy's Humanities Research Board and will allocate research grants as well as postgraduate awards.

## *PhD Vivas*

**“Grilling Left Student Burnt Out”**  
**“A System in Danger of Overload”**  
**THES, 15/5/98**

Is the PhD viva outmoded? Alison Utley talks to one candidate who thinks it destroyed his career. A hostile viva led to the external examiner demanding rewrites which shifted the entire emphasis of the work towards the external examiner's field, so that the candidate no longer considered the work to be his own. Ewan Gillon (former NPC General Secretary) calls for a radical overhaul of the entire PhD process, with a more flexible model for study reducing the importance of a the thesis and viva as the sole form of assessment.

Compiled by **Jamie Darwen**

# Recent NPC Responses

**Andrew Green** summarises the recent crop of official documents from the NPC

In recent months, the NPC has released official responses to a number of consultation papers and reports concerning a number of key issues in postgraduate education. These responses, targeted at the authors of reports and consultation papers, are often highly effective in bringing across the viewpoint, and needs, of postgraduate students as made clear through NPC policy. The NPC's voice is listened to, making the contents of such responses extremely important affairs to get right.

The first of the recent consultation papers is known as *The Booth Report*, and focusses on accreditation in teaching and higher education. The full text of the consultation paper is available on the web, at:

<http://www.cvcj.ac.uk/consult.html>

One of the key themes of the NPC's response is its support for the establishment of an *Institute of Learning and Teaching* as a means of improving quality of teaching — and a separate consultation paper concerning the Institute alone has been released very recently. This consultation paper talks about accreditation for academic staff, and ways of continuing and expanding upon professional development within academia. The NPC is concerned here to raise accreditation of research student supervision as a distinct issue to be addressed, and is keen to point out that postgraduate researchers

who teach — many of whom will continue to teach within academia — form a significant sector that needs to be supported by the Institute.

There has also been a consultation paper concerning the next *Research Assessment Exercise*, which takes

representative from the NPC itself should also be present. In addition to the foundation of the QAA, the paper discusses the framework for qualifications in the UK — attempting to set an overall classification standard against which masters, MPhil, PhD and further degrees may be awarded. Furthermore, the

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*“...if postgraduate research is to be used as an indicator of a department's overall research quality, then the research environment ... must also be taken into consideration.”*

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the form of a number of specific questions to be addressed. One of the NPC's main points is that if postgraduate research is to be used as an indicator of a department's overall research quality, then the research environment provided by the department (facilities, quality of supervision, etc), must also be taken into consideration. An assessment based on research output alone is dangerously misleading.

Lastly, a paper entitled *Developing the Quality Assurance and Standards Framework for UK Higher Education*. Moves are well underway for the establishment of a central *Quality Assurance Agency* for Higher Education, and the NPC supports the recommendation of the *Dearing Review* that the board of the QAA should include a student and an international member, and is also anxious that a

paper goes on to mention codes of practice and institutional review, which the NPC supports on the assumption that the codes of practice are sufficiently tight and well-enforced to make any difference. The NPC also points out that, since Codes of Practice only define a minimum standard, the codes should regularly be revised upwards in order to promote a continuous increase in the quality of this bottom line.

The complete texts to all NPC official responses can be found as part of the NPC's *On-Line Newsletter* — the URL is:

<http://www.npc.org.uk/news/>

Further information is uploaded to this area as an when it becomes available.

## Contacting the NPC

The NPC's General Secretary, Martin Gough, is always at hand to answer any queries you might have about the NPC or any of 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 background information on the NPC, our events and publications, together with an extensive on-line version of *Newsletter*, and the opportunity to automatically subscribe to the NPC's email mailing lists. Just fire-up any web browser and visit <http://www.npc.org.uk/>