

NPC Policy Against New Private Loans

Bill Hanage presents an update on the new postgraduate loans scheme

As those of you who read John Gray's article in the last *NPC Newsletter* will know Midland Bank and the '94 Group of universities (Bath, Birkbeck, Durham, UEA, Exeter, Essex, Lancaster, LSE, Reading, Surrey, Sussex, York and Warwick) have got together to bring us the brave new world of postgraduate loans. The NPC has a number of concerns regarding these loans, not least the fact they seem to have been designed with minimal consultation of their eventual consumers — students.

As John pointed out in his article, the suggestions so far do not improve substantially upon the *Professional Studies Loan* currently available from Midland. This existing loan is aimed at those on vocational courses such as Medicine or Law, who are likely to have relatively little difficulty with repayments. It is clear that any new scheme will have to differ radically from the existing set-up if it is to have its stated aim of throwing open the doors of Postgraduate education to a wider public. In a world where academic institutions and research are woefully underfunded, especially in the

humanities, only the most career-oriented courses will be likely to benefit from a greater student influx. If you were doing a masters course and fancied going on to a PhD you might as well forget it. Get this: a £7,500 loan to fund one year's fees and living expenses would translate into a monthly payback of £130 for 11 years. Try paying *that* on a PhD grant!

While the final proposals from Midland have yet to be unveiled, Esther Connock, who is in charge of the development at Midland, has told

plastered with the University's name, is not really any different from Barclays' *Professional Studies Loan*, apart from the fact that you get a three month repayment holiday after you finish your course (wow).

In view of these concerns, the NPC has composed a policy statement, which is summarised below.

❶ The NPC is concerned at the lack of consultation of the loans' target market, and

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me they hope for the loans to be available to this year's intake of students. Despite the lack of a concrete plan, 12 of the thirteen universities in the '94 Group have already signed up. In fact Warwick has gone one better and got a loan scheme going already with Barclays to fund one-year masters courses. This scheme, advertised in a nice glossy brochure

believes that the current suggestions are no great leap forward in financial provision for postgrads. The huge levels of debt involved are incompatible with many aspects of academic career structure and could prohibit further study for research degrees.

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② It seems as if the Universities involved will use their names as something of a marketing ploy to lull students into what may be a false sense of security. Student may therefore take out a loan they might not otherwise have considered.

③ We are concerned that the introduction of this scheme will be used as an excuse to introduce top-up fees for a wider majority of courses, forcing students to take the loans and get themselves into debt.

④ We are also unhappy that the scheme will be available only to students studying at '94 group Universities, and that students on different courses will find themselves facing different terms and conditions. We believe that any loan scheme should be publicly administered and available to all.

⑤ The NPC is not opposed to any new scheme which offers new opportunities for financial provision. However, this scheme does not seem to be it. Any loan scheme for postgraduate students must take into account the varied nature of postgraduate courses and uncertain academic career prospects. Hence flexibility should be central to any proposal.

For a full copy of this policy statement please email Bill Hanage on whanage@rjpm.ac.uk or jdarwen@goofy.sunion.warwick.ac.uk



Bill Hanage is studying for a PhD in infectious disease at the *Royal Postgraduate Medical School*, Hammersmith Hospital.

John Gray's article on the new loans scheme was published in the January Newsletter, and is still available for inspection on the NPC's web site at: <http://www.un.umist.ac.uk/npc/>

NPC Endorses HEQC Research Guidelines

Chris Haslam discusses higher education quality controls

Over the past ten years a great deal of attention has been focused on "good practice" at the research degree level. More recently, the joint HEFCE-CVCP-SCOP *Review of Postgraduate Education*, chaired by Professor Martin Harris, addressed a number of matters relating to the postgraduate provision of British universities and colleges, both within the UK and overseas. The "Harris Report" makes a number of recommendations regarding how UK higher education's enviable reputation in this area might be sustained and further developed.

The increased number and diversity of research students clearly needs to be carefully planned for and managed, since the consequences of their arrival at an institution are not directly comparable with those of an additional influx of undergraduates. If research students comprise a larger proportion of the overall student population in any given institution, there are implications, in particular, for information technology and other learning/research related facilities; for the deployment of research-active staff; and for graduate level facilities.

Acknowledging the importance of research students to the higher education sector, the findings of the *Higher Education Quality Council's* audit investigations (which now number in excess of 200 separate visits) have suggested that while progress is clearly being made, continued attention is required in order to sustain the quality of research students' learning experiences. HEQC's views in relation to this matter have been echoed by the Harris Report which advocated the early development of a "code of practice" for postgraduate research education.

HEQC has, therefore, recently produced sector-wide guidelines on the quality assurance of research degrees which embrace these and other related matters. In exploring the

feasibility of developing such guidance, the views of a wide range of parties has been sought, ranging from research bodies, commercial and industrial organisations and, of course, academic staff and research students at institutional level. In publishing its *Research Degree Guidelines*, HEQC has secured the formal support of the *Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals* and the *Standing Conference of Principals*, the *UK Council for Graduate Education* and, importantly, the *National Postgraduate Committee* representing all its members across the UK. Professor Martin Harris has also formally endorsed the *Research Degree Guidelines*.



HEQC regards the wide-ranging document as constituting guidance rather than a prescriptive framework; the publication is one which has purposefully been designed to be manageable (in A5 booklet format) and one which research students, their supervisors and institutions can "dip" into as and when they see fit for guidance on a particular matter.

The *Research Degree Guidelines* are available from:

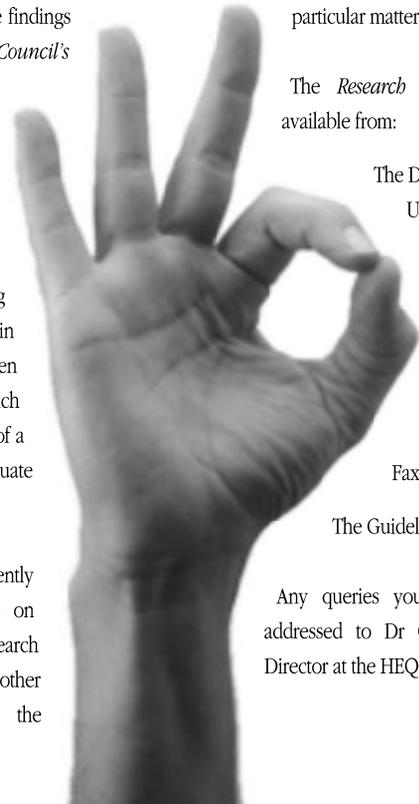
The Distribution Department,
UCAS, Fulton House,
Jessop Avenue,
Cheltenham,
Gloucestershire,
GL50 3SH

Tel: 01242 222444
— ext 503

Fax: 01242 255725

The Guidelines cost £8.

Any queries you might have may be addressed to Dr Chris Haslam, Assistant Director at the HEQC (Tel: 0121 455 8282)



Recipe of the Day: Postgraduate Student Associations

Clare Mortimer talks about an important survey being undertaken by the NPC

Take a bunch of enthusiastic postgraduate students mix together with a chunk of constitution, a drop of student representation and training, a pinch of funding (when available), season to taste with HEQC guidelines and a sprinkling of Dearing and Harris; (students unions graduate schools and sabbatical officers optional extras). This can be a recipe for disaster particularly if a bit of apathy is added at the wrong time. So what is the magic ingredient that makes for a perfect *Postgraduate Student Association* (PGSA)?

Over the past few years a number of institutions have approached the NPC to ask for advice in this area. As a result of these enquiries one of the remits of the NPC executive this year is to develop guidelines on how to set up and run a successful postgraduate student association (PGSA). As it is likely that success lies in well practiced techniques and not simply one magic ingredient we would like to find out about some of the successes and failures experienced by your institutions. We hope to identify some of the major pitfalls in PGSA's and examples of tried and tested practices which have been employed to overcome these problems.

A survey of the areas that might be covered in these guidelines was sent out in February and will be repeated in this NPC mailing. Your comments and experiences will allow us to tailor these guidelines to your needs, so please send in your replies and make your opinion heard in this important area.

For a copy of the survey, or to obtain more information, please contact:

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The Journal of Graduate Education

James Irvine talks about the latest edition...

The latest edition of the the *Journal of Graduate Education* is currently being printed and should be sent out shortly. The *Journal* is sponsored by the NPC to encourage the research and report good practice in postgraduate education.

In the lead article, '*Graduate Schools: A New Era in Graduate Education*', Professor Richard Balment and Linda Magee discuss the new graduate schools at the University of Manchester. Rather than create a single campus-wide graduate school as Warwick University have done, Manchester has opted for four different schools in Arts, Social and Legal Studies, Education, and Science, Engineering and Medicine. The authors detail one division within the Graduate School of Science, Engineering and Medicine and describe the effects of the changes.

The experience of postgraduates is the subject of two articles. In the foreword, Ewan Gillon argues for a greater emphasis on diversity within postgraduate education, not just in terms of the provision of courses but also in terms of the experience for individual students. Eunice Okorochoa looks at what international students expect when they embark on education in the UK, and how their experience compares to these expectations.

Jamie Darwen, Chair of the NPC, writes about the outcome and recommendations for the Harris Review of postgraduate education, of which he was a member. Karen Hinett reviews '*The Research Student's Guide to Success*' by Pat Cryer. In addition, there is a report from the 1995 NPC Conference.

Production of the *Journal* over the last year has been much delayed, but there is a good crop of interesting articles in the pipeline for this year, including on transferable skills for a PhD, research student discussion groups, graduate students' associations and on the experience of overseas students. Further articles are always welcome. More details about

the *Journal* can be found on the web, at:

<http://www.strath.ac.uk/Students/GradEdu/>

or follow the link from the NPC's site.

A subscription for four issues costs £12 for students or NPC members, £24 for academic staff, or £36 otherwise.

Subscription to the *Journal* at a substantial discount is an option as part of the NPC's *Individual Subscriber Scheme*. The benefits: you receive a copy of this newsletter bi-monthly, along with an *Annual Report* and invitations to the conference and other events. Furthermore, on request you can have free copies of our *Guidelines* (normally priced at £2 each) and input into NPC consultation exercises. Membership with the *Journal* costs £20 for students, and £30 for non-students — and without the *Journal*, it's £12 for students, and £18 for non-students.

For further details on this please see the NPC's web site, or contact John Gray, the General Secretary. Details of how to do that are on the back cover of this Newsletter.



NPC Supports Amendment to NUS Conference

Jamie Darwen examines a motion concerning the research environment and the *Dearing Report*

The end of March sees the annual *NUS Conference* in Blackpool. The NPC is not entitled to send a voting delegate, but our General Secretary, John Gray, will be attending as an observer. One of the main motions this year relates to general issues surrounding the *Dearing Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education*. At its recent meeting in London, the NPC agreed an amendment to this motion on the funding of research and how this affects provision for research students.

The NPC cannot propose amendments to NUS itself. Instead, students' unions at Sussex and Westminster Universities are submitting the amendment with the NPC's support.

The amendment supports research activity as an important part of higher education, pointing out the obvious social and economic benefits and the contribution it makes to the learning experience of all students. It then criticises the recent *Research Assessment Exercise* (RAE), which will help to concentrate research activity in an elite core of institutions. It also points out some of the direct effects the RAE has had on research students. In particular, the increase in research activity of academic staff has often not been

matched by a reduction in teaching load. Commitments to teach, and supervise research students, should be recognised and accounted for, so that students are supported adequately.

One way of helping to reduce the teaching load of academic staff has been to employ of postgraduates to teach undergraduate courses. There have been encouraging recent developments in the support and training provided to postgraduate teachers, but this support must be available to all.

A high quality research environment is essential for research training. The RAE is not a suitable measure of quality of provision for research students; rather, factors such as quality of facilities and supervision should be considered in determining funding for research students.

Finally, the amendment directs the National Executive of NUS to work with the NPC to highlight the problems that postgraduates face in teaching and research, and to campaign for a mechanism for funding research which will support high quality research activity and provision of training and facilities in a variety of different environments.

At the time of writing, I do not know the amendment will have fared in the lottery that is NUS compositing (the mysterious process whereby NUS whittles down several hundred amendments into a manageable form for the conference). However, assuming it remains in some recognisable form, the NPC urges you to encourage your NUS delegates to support this amendment in Blackpool.

The full text of the amendment can be found in the "Breaking News" section of the NPC's web site, at:

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

Diary of a General Secretary

John Gray reports on what he's been up to over the past three months...

January: I was commissioned to write articles for several publications. Firstly, a general article for *Prospects Postgrad* aimed at those contemplating postgraduate study; secondly, an article introducing the NPC for *Hobsons' Postgrad Update*; finally, an opinion article for the *THES* on private postgraduate loans. Some of my time was involved in chasing up details of the loans scheme, which seem to be excruciatingly slow in appearing.

February: After the meeting, I was away for two weeks, and spent my time on my return investigating the new *Quality Assurance Agency* (I put this in capitals, but it doesn't appear to have an official name yet). Basically, this is a new body to replace the HEQC and the QA-related parts of the funding councils, and will carry out all the Quality Audit of institutions and the dissemination of good practice. The reason for the change is that there was considered to be substantial duplication of roles. What remains to be seen is the composition of the agency's board. I am concerned that it should represent students (including postgraduate students) effectively, and I have written to the board's chairman about this.

March: On 4th March, I attended a Postgraduate Issues Network meeting of the SRHE (the *Society for Research into Higher Education*). This provided interesting international comparisons of the changing backgrounds of taught postgraduates, and addressed some of the issues (particularly the typology) of the Harris report.

The end of this month will be busy; I will be attending the *NUS Conference* on the 24th and 25th and leading a session at the RAWs (*Research and Welfare Staff*) annual conference on the 26th. This network (which I referred to in my last column) is a forum for the research and welfare staff of student unions: it discusses both national policy developments and local good practice in e.g. representation and communication.

I've also been preparing material for an NUS mailout (which will give us some publicity), our own mailout and handling general queries as usual.



Who Said Conference Organising was Easy?

Philip Coggin and Richard Race give some tips on running an academic conference.

found surface mail to be more time consuming but still a useful exercise in attracting postgraduate students without access to email facilities. We have learnt that a stamped addressed envelope can save much time and effort in dealing with surface mail correspondence. However, a third of replies overlooked this request.

The issue of commercial and non-commercial conferences is significant. We both believe this can affect what can be achieved — e.g. the types of key speakers, presenters and delegates you can attract to conference. The amount of extra money available can improve such things as conference brochure design. A commercial conference can take up more time but these issues have to be considered at the outset. It is debatable how this can affect conference i.e. will the environment be a more formal or informal one? Ultimately, organisers decide which conference format suits their demands and needs.



Finally, we discuss the syndrome, "Final Week Flexibility". You are almost guaranteed that at least one presenter will pull out for any number of reasons. The programme has to be adjusted accordingly. The conference brochure goes through numerous drafts, additions, edits and exclusions. Conference evaluation is always helpful and as long as comments are constructive rather than destructive, evaluation can assist in future conference organising.

We conclude by summarising what we consider the four key elements in conference organising:

- The need or demand for conference;
- Conference preparation;
- The issues surrounding commercial or non-commercial conferences;
- 'Final Week Flexibility'.



The *American Reducation Research Association* (AERA) home page on the World Wide Web is at <http://aera.net>

Philip Coggin is organising the *Education Policy Conference* which takes place at Wolfson College, Oxford University, on the 15th March 1997. For more details email philip.coggin@wolfson.oxford.ac.uk

Richard Race, a member of KEDG, helped organise *Thinking Theory*. The third KEDG conference, *Publish and be Dammed!* will take place on the 15th November 1997. For more details, email edd45@keele.ac.uk

The NPC runs *two* e-mail mailing lists through the Mailbase system. *Postgrad* is used for discussions of any issues relating to postgraduate education, and *NPC* is used for mailing details of NPC events and meetings, and for policy discussions. To subscribe, send a message to npc-request@mailbase.ac.uk, saying which list you'd like to join, and the list manager will put you on. If you've any questions regarding the mailing lists, you can mail the same address, and we'll reply to your query as soon possible. Further information about the *Mailbase* system is available from their site on the World-Wide Web, at <http://www.mailbase.ac.uk>.

This article aims to give two researchers experiences of an enjoyable if time consuming process: conference organising. The conference process relates to the *Keele Education Discussion Group's* (KEDG) conference, *Thinking Theory* and a conference being organised at Wolfson College, Oxford University, revolving around the subject of Education Policy. We both ultimately hope this article will encourage other postgraduate students to organise their own conferences.

We begin with the issues surrounding the initial idea for conference. If one postgraduate student desires a forum to give a paper on "home soil" and is prepared to put both the work and time in then usually a conference will eventually materialise. We both agree that support is essential if the conference process is to proceed. Moral support comes from fellow postgraduates. Advisory and financial support comes from your Department. The conference process should be an exercise which is mutually beneficial to both postgraduates and your Department.

We agree that preparation is crucial. We have used both email and surface mail for both publicity and Calls for Papers. Email has proved more useful. We have used the *postgrad* mailing list through *Mailbase*, and the AERA listserv pages (see below) which has attracted both domestic and international students to conference. 59% of presenters to the first two KEDG conferences have been external and found through email. The first Oxford conference has attracted presenters from Australia and Canada. We have

Press Digest – Jan-Feb 1997

Our new regular round-up of postgraduate issues in the national press

Research Assessment Exercise

THES, 24/1/97

The results of the *Research Assessment Exercise* (RAE) were published in December 1996. In the RAE, departments were ranked according to their research performance at levels 1, 2, 3b, 3a, 4, 5 and 5*. A rating of 5* indicates that most of the research being carried out in a department is of international standing. Then, in January, the *Higher Education Funding Council for England* (HEFCE) announced the method it would use to allocate research funding to institutions in 1997-98, based on the results of the RAE.

The great majority of the £704 million research funds HEFCE allocates will be used for quality-related research (QR). The amount allocated is based on a formula which takes into account three factors:

Subject: Subjects will be assigned to three bands reflecting the relative cost of each subject: Band A (high cost laboratory or clinical subjects), Band B (intermediate cost subjects with a technical, experimental or practice-based element), Band C (other subjects). These bands will have cost weights: Band A – 1.7; Band B – 1.3; Band C – 1.0.

Volume: The number of researchers in a department will be taken into account as follows: research active staff – weighted 1; research students – 0.15; research assistants and fellows – 0.1. There is also a measure for charitable income, weighted 0.25.

Quality: The weightings attached to RAE grades will be far more selective than in previous RAEs, and are expected to widen the funding gap between top-performing and lower-ranked departments. QR will not be provided for departments achieving 1 or 2 ratings in the 1996 RAE. Each rating point between 3b and 5 will attract a weight 50 per cent greater than the previous point, with a 20 per cent premium for 5*.

Departments rated 2 in institutions not funded for research before 1992 (ie. most former polytechnics) may get a share of a special fund which will be used to encourage collaboration between low- and high-rated departments.

Dearing Review

Guardian Higher, 21/1/97

The *Dearing Committee of Inquiry into Higher Education* is due to report this summer. Some of the proposals from the committee's working group on research were reported.

- Universities could forfeit research funds if they fail to hit minimum standards of competence in their chosen fields. Institutions will only get "seedcorn" funding for new projects if they can prove their work is of truly international or regional importance. This will concentrate more money in top-rated research centres, and most likely those with a more commercial bent.
- New incentives to share equipment and improve collaboration. The "top tier" (likely to receive the bulk of funding) will be encouraged to share equipment and expertise with other groups of researchers — creating regional networks.
- More involvement of industrial and overseas referees on assessment panels for grant allocations.

- Proper training for academics to make better use of their "intellectual property". However, industry, government and charity must not attempt to get "research on the cheap" and must pay their share of overheads in contracts with universities.
- Retain the "dual support system" for funding research. However, there is pressure to transfer allocation of all funds to the research councils, with money going direct to research groups rather than universities.
- Concern that RAE does not reward work most closely linked to commercial applications. Help fund more exchanges between academics and those working in industry and commerce — particularly small/medium businesses which are not yet profiting from intellectual developments at local universities.
- Scholarship funds for academics whose main priority is teaching, so they can keep up with latest developments in research fields.
- More focus on arts/humanities, with strong backing for a new research council.

DOCTOR FUN

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



Meanwhile, on the opposite side of the globe, explorers stumble onto a discovery that they solve the puzzle of Easter Island



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 a brand-new "Breaking News" section), contacts for its officers, information on our publications, details of forthcoming meetings and events, and a recently-updated graphical interface. 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 new address:

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

John Gray, the NPC's General Secretary, is always at hand to answer any queries you may have, or to discuss any of the issues the NPC is dealing with. You can reach him at:

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Tel: 0121 554 5614 Fax: 0121 333 4218

e-mail: grayjw@aston.ac.uk

NPC Meeting: November 1996

Martin Gough gives us the low-down on the events in Sheffield

Those in the know on the morning of Saturday 30 November ventured to the Steel City for the much anticipated NPC meeting. We were hosted well, albeit to the chagrin of one or two scholarly members of Sheffield University Students Union who had hoped to be using the plush room we had booked for catching up on their studies as their essay deadlines caught up with them! The preparations by the host delegates, led on the night by Rachel Johnson, whom we thanked especially at the end of the meeting, were stupendous. We enjoyed first a sumptuous buffet spread for lunch to build us up for tackling the afternoon's tasks ahead. And we concluded with celebrations of our fine achievements from the day in the convivial surroundings of a nearby hostelry, entertained by people dressed up as ostriches and other complementary garb.

But what exactly did we do in between, what exactly were our fine achievements from the day, I hear you wonder? Well, as Chair, Jamie Darwen opened the meeting in the authoritative manner with which we are accustomed: we all dutifully said hello to each other, and then embarked upon the discussion of the great issues of the day in front of us. First up was the minutes of the last meeting, which were passed without too many complaints, except for a reference to used banknotes. When it transpired that there were no matters arising, we were all getting a bit worried, our favourite regular discussion spots failing to throw up much controversy. Would the meeting fizzle out into an anticlimax after all our anticipation?

We need not have grown anxious. Jamie was on hand to report about his lunches with the Press, and John about his influenza-influenced swotting up of the bottomless NPC document archives. We discussed the pros and cons of European junkets for Executive Officers, fine-tuned our response to *Dearing's Review*, gave a boost to our revived campaign on Part-Time study, and better was to come. We settled on the best way to support the ideas behind the *AUT Day of Action*, constructed advice on the AUT's plans for professional accreditation for teaching (including that performed by postgraduates), affirmed that our meetings should ensure access to persons with disabilities; and, finally, we exposed the real truth behind those glossy leaflets offering YOU "the loan to make your dreams of the postgraduate life come true". See the minutes for more details!