

Are you at a Postgrad-Friendly Institution?

Now the financial year is formally over, **Martin Gough** reveals the NPC's halls of honour and shame...

The National Postgraduate Committee values its links with Higher Education Institutions. To embody these links the NPC runs an affiliation scheme. Normally we expect student unions of institutions to commit themselves financially on behalf of their postgraduate members. Occasionally an office of the institution itself will provide the finances for the affiliation if for some reason the student union cannot take full charge of the affiliation. Out of respect for those institutions which have committed themselves to affiliation, and hence committed themselves to their postgraduate community in this respect, we are happy to publicise them. I provide the list immediately below for those which have affiliated for the session 1997-98:

Aston University
University of Bath
Birkbeck College
University of Birmingham
Bretton Hall College
University of Bristol
Brunel University
Buckinghamshire College
Canterbury Christ Church College

Chichester Institute
Cranfield University
University of East Anglia
Edge Hill University College
Edinburgh University
University of Essex
University of Exeter

Queen Margaret College
Queen Mary & Westfield College
University College of Ripon & York St John
Royal Postgraduate Medical School (the former:
now part of Imperial College, which is not as a
whole affiliated)
Royal Veterinary College

"Out of respect for those institutions which have committed themselves to affiliation, and hence committed themselves to their postgraduate members, we are happy to publicise them"

Institute of Education
University of Kent
Lancaster University
University of Leeds
Leeds Metropolitan University
University of Leicester
Liverpool Hope University College
London School of Economics
University of Manchester
Institute of Neurology
University of Newcastle
Nottingham Trent University
University of Oxford

Salford University
St Andrews University
St George's Hospital Medical School
University of Sheffield
Sheffield Hallam University
Southampton Institute
Staffordshire University
University of Stirling
University of Surrey
University of Sussex
University of Wales Aberystwyth
University of Wales Swansea

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University of Warwick
University of Wolverhampton
Worcester College
University of York

By default, we regard other HEIs with postgraduates as lacking in their postgraduate provision, at least to the extent that they lack affiliate status and the benefits accompanying this. (Details of these benefits can be found on the NPC Web page or from the General Secretary, who is sending out a sheet for this enclosed with the mailing for this Newsletter.)

A number of these HEIs have nonetheless expressed a serious interest in affiliation and, indeed, it would still be possible for them to join the above list only slightly retrospectively, since the affiliation year runs October to September. We wish them all the best in pursuing this for next year otherwise and joining the privileged group above. We recommend that postgraduates in these institutions, in both lists below, make a special effort to have their voices heard to this end and to the end of their own welfare, and we recommend that those who hold the pursestrings demonstrate some politically correct willpower. Firstly, those HEIs who have allowed their affiliations to lapse, having for their own reasons not yet honoured our request for re-affiliation (as indicated in invoices sent out in the last financial year):

University of Aberdeen
University of Abertay
Anglia Polytechnic University
Bell College of Technology
Bishop Grosseteste College
University of Bradford (N.B. 4 years lapse)
University of Cambridge
University of Central Lancashire
Cheltenham & Gloucester College of HE
City University (N.B. 4 years lapse)
Coventry University
De Montfort University
Dundee University
University of Glamorgan
University of Glasgow
University of Greenwich
Heriot Watt University (N.B. 4 years lapse)
University of Huddersfield
King Alfred's College
Kings College School of Medicine & Dentistry
University of Liverpool
Liverpool John Moores University

London Guildhall University
University of London Union
UMIST
Napier University (N.B. 4 years lapse)
University of North London (N.B. 4 years lapse)
University of Nottingham

The Open University
Queen's University of Belfast
Royal Free Hospital Medical School
School of Oriental & African Studies
Scottish Agricultural College
Scottish College of Textiles
University of Southampton
University of Strathclyde
University of Wales Institute, Cardiff

University of Wales Lampeter
University of Westminster (N.B. 4 years lapse)
Writtle Agricultural College (N.B. 4 years lapse)

Secondly, those HEIs who have expressed an apparent interest in joining for the first time:

Bradford & Ilkley Community College
University of Brighton
University of Central England
Doncaster College
University of Hull
University of Keele
Kings College London (including the Institute of Psychiatry)
London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine
University College London
University of East London
Luton University
University of Plymouth
University of Portsmouth
College of St Mark & St John
University of Sunderland
University of Teesside
University of Wales Cardiff
University of the West of England

There is a large number of institutions yet beyond these three lists whom we would also welcome into the fold but whose officers have so far been reluctant even to raise their half of a dialogue with us on issues in postgraduate provision. This does not bode well for the postgraduate experience there. They know that the NPC can help. All that they need to do is get in touch!

Martin Gough is the outgoing General Secretary, and the new Chair, of the NPC.

The New NPC Officers and Post-Holders

Following the elections held at the recent NPC Conference in Lancaster, here is the low-down on who's doing what in the Committee...

All Officers in post were elected at the 1998 AGM (1st August, Lancaster University) as listed. The first port of call for queries generally is the ...

NPC General Secretary

Jeremy Hoad
11 Onley Street, Norwich, NR2 2EA
01603 473487
npc@npc.org.uk

Queries of a more local nature may also be directed to **Regional Representatives**, whose role is linking the Committee with institutions in their regions, arranging visits, etc.:

South East

Tim Hudson, Students Union, Chichester Institute of H.E., Bishop Otter College, College Lane, Chichester, W.Sussex, PO19 4PE — 01243 816392/4

London

Lucy Reed, President, Birkbeck College London Students' Union, Birkbeck College, Malet Street, London WC1E 7HX — 0171 631 6365
president@bcsu.bbk.ac.uk

East Midlands

Simon Parish, Plant and Environmental Research, Erasmus Darwin Building, Nottingham Trent University, Clifton Site, Nottingham, NG11 8NS — 0115 941 8418 x.3351/3048
simon.parisb@ntu.ac.uk

West Midlands

Hannah Quirk, School of Legal Studies, University of Wolverhampton, Arthur Storer Building, Molineux Street, Wolverhampton, WV1 1SB — 01902 321522
in5451@ulw.ac.uk

North West

Nav Ahmad, Postgraduate & Mature Students Officer, University of Manchester Students Union, Manchester M13 9PR — 0161 275 2745 (Pager: 04325 263426)
nav_ahmad@hotmail.com

East Anglia: (vacant) · North East: (vacant) · South West: (vacant) · Northern Ireland: (vacant) · Wales: (vacant)

These vacancies, and those below, could be filled by election at the next NPC meeting; in the meantime other officers reside in some of these regions and can act as contact points.

Treasurer

John Gray — 0121-688-8897
npc@azuli.demon.co.uk

Chair

Martin Gough, National Postgraduate Committee, c/o Leeds University Union, P.O.Box 157, Leeds LS1 1UH
cedamg@leeds.ac.uk

Minutes Secretary

Nick Lipscomb, 2 Lovett Walk, Winchester, SO22 6NL
nick@lipscomb.demon.co.uk

Academic Secretary

Rachel Hall, Vice-President (Graduates), Oxford University Students Union, New Barnett House, 28 Little Clarendon Street, Oxford OX1 2HU — 01865 270777
rachel.hall@christ-church.oxford.ac.uk

Conference Secretary (vacant)

Equal Opportunities Officer

Ruth Chandler, School of History, Chichester Institute of H.E., Bishop Otter College, College Lane, Chichester, W.Sussex, PO19 4PE — 01243 816000
r.chandler@chibe.ac.uk

Communications Officer (vacant)

Development Officer

Liz Butler, Education Unit, Sheffield Hallam University Union of Students, Pond Street, Sheffield, S1 2BW — 0114 225 4124
l.butler@shu.ac.uk

International Officer

Clement Katulusbi, Dept. of Theology & Religious Studies, University of Leeds, Leeds LS2 9JT — 0113 2333649
trskc@leeds.ac.uk

Postgraduate Association Officer

Scott Lawley, Edge Hill University College, Lancaster University

Project Officers

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

James Groves, The Graduate College, Lancaster University, Lancaster, LA2 0PF — 01524 65201 x.93945
j.groves@lancaster.ac.uk

Ben Avelino: blavelin@shu.ac.uk

Matt Loynes, Sheffield Hallam University, School of Engineering (Research), Pond Street,

Sheffield, S1 1WB — 0114 225 3091
m.j.loynes@shu.ac.uk

MSU Liaison Officer

Margaret Davine — 0181-863-3675
margaret.davine@edexcel.org.uk

Ordinary Elected Members (without portfolio)

Peter Campbell: jpcamb0@pine.shu.ac.uk
Alex Clapper: essfb@warwick.ac.uk

Honorary President (vacant)

Honorary Vice-Presidents (vacant)

Subcommittees

Communications Subcommittee

Jeremy Hoad, Martin Gough, James Irvine (as Managing Editor of the Journal of Graduate Education), (2 vacancies), Andrew Green (co-opted as *Publications Assistant*)

Constitutional Subcommittee

Jeremy Hoad, Martin Gough, Matt Loynes, Rachel Hall, James Groves; Appointments Panel is above + Ruth Chandler
Financial Subcommittee: Jeremy Hoad, Martin Gough, John Gray, Nick Lipscomb, Ruth Chandler, Ewan Gillon

Conference Sub-Committee

Jeremy Hoad, John Gray, Scott Lawley

Access and Equal Opportunities Subcommittee

Jeremy Hoad, Ruth Chandler, Margaret Davine, Clement Katulusbi, Martin Egan, Eduardo Gonzalez, Ben Avelino (co opted)

Development Subcommittee

Jeremy Hoad, Scott Lawley, Liz Butler, Peter Granby, Regional Representatives (listed above).

Scottish Sub-Committee consists ex officio of delegate members from Scottish HEIs

Electronic Mailing List Administrator

Jamie Darven, Education Research & Development Adviser, Students' Union, University of Warwick, Coventry CV4 7AL — 01203 572821
npc-request@mailbase.ac.uk

Beyond Assumptions

Martin Egan discusses lesbian, gay and bisexual researchers and the supervisor relationship

The lesbian, gay or bisexual research student-supervisor working relationship is a subject that has not been addressed. This article will explore this relationship in an attempt to foster further discussion. There is a void in the popular literature when it comes to deeper scrutiny of the supervisor-research student relationship and/or its significance generally. Many will argue that sexuality is not relevant to this relationship and, therefore, not significant enough to single out. The experience of some research students across the UK suggests otherwise.

Admittedly, sexuality should not be an issue in the everyday run of things and general good supervision practice should be the same for all. However, the underlying assumption is that all research students are of a heterosexual orientation. When a supervisor encounters a student of homosexual or bisexual orientation, he or she may be

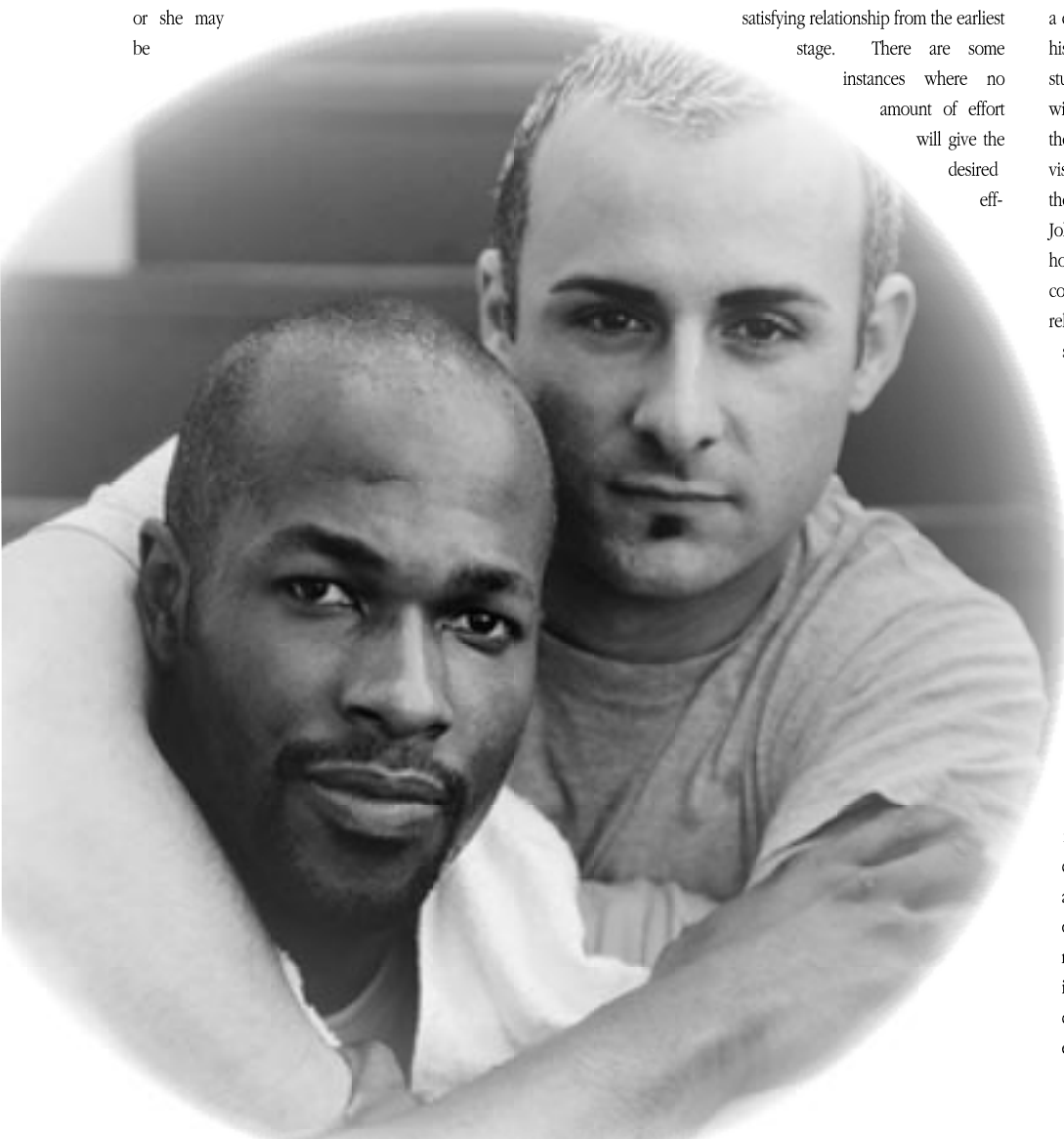
shocked and/or surprised by the fact. Sexuality is not something that one can 'switch off' whilst at work and activate again when in private! Our sexuality is at play at work: from the pronouns we use when discussing our partners to the person we will bring to a work-related function. Hence, it is reasonable to examine the consequences of assuming everyone is heterosexual.

Anyone who has been in research will realise that the relationship between a research student and his or her supervisor has substantial influence on a student's academic progress and overall well-being. We have all heard of Ph.D. programmes that are never completed and the excuse is often 'bad' supervision! Sadly, when a thesis is submitted on time we hear less in the form of praise for a supervisor. It is both the responsibility of the research student and the supervisor to develop a healthy, functional and satisfying relationship from the earliest stage. There are some instances where no amount of effort will give the desired eff-

ect. In these cases, departments and universities should step in with appropriate action. Mediation can go some way towards improving or replacing these relationships. It would be sensible at the outset to establish some degree of compatibility between the pair. Nevertheless, a communication problem will sometimes not arise until well into the research programme. The following scenario is a case in point.

When 'John' was over a year into his Ph.D. programme his boyfriend visited him at the university. During this short visit, colleagues saw John and his boyfriend briefly holding hands. John's supervisor, a professor, told him that if he "wanted to be gay", it was his "choice" but he had no business pushing it on anyone else. The situation was worsened by the fact that there was an almost zero tolerance of homosexuality in the department. The supervisor was in a difficult position: he was being fed on the homophobia of his colleagues which simply exacerbated the situation. The student did not feel able to effectively command respect within the department. He incurred huge penalties, such as the denial of free access to the building and a ban on visitors, all of which were sanctioned by the supervisor from the premise that he leave his sexuality at home. As a result John went through a prolonged period of working in a hostile and stressful environment. If effective communication and mutual respect had been present in the relationship, the supervisor could have protected the student. Ultimately, in a situation where the student was vulnerable and his overall well-being was at stake, it was the responsibility of the supervisor to make every effort to protect him.

A second scenario demonstrates how a healthy relationship may evolve. This case was one where the university had a committed equal opportunities policy that worked. Having previously been at the receiving end of severe homophobia and discrimination in the work place, the student ensured that the supervisor was aware of his sexual orientation prior to accepting the studentship. In effect, this gave the student added security whilst it allowed the supervisor to have a greater understanding and awareness of the student. From the start, their relationship was based on honesty and open communication. Like the supervisor in the first case above, the supervisor had little or no previous experience of working with an openly gay person. For the first few months the supervisor seemed uneasy around the student in certain situations; however, a year later a sense of comfort existed between the two. This case is a clear example of how being up front about one's sexual



orientation from the start though not a simple task, makes for a more honest relationship.

Being up front and open with a superior is not always easy. It is unthinkable for many, depending on how comfortably open they are elsewhere. In other cases too, the openly gay student and supervisor never discuss or refer to the student's sexuality. Provided the supervisory relationship is effective and the student is happy, this is acceptable. In complete contrast is the case where the gay student is harassed, penalised and discriminated against openly at the hands of his/her supervisor. Sadly, the supervisor may not even be aware of the consequences of his/her behaviour or lack of it. Regardless of how open either student or supervisor is going

non-gay student supervisor relationships where the relationship is less than ideal. Cultural, political, national, religious, language, racial or other differences are often less than acknowledged and sometimes abused in the supervisory relationship. It is clear that the issue of good supervisor relationships is not straightforward but through supervisor training and student-supervisor seminars it can improve. The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC), through its equal opportunities committee, is committed to improvement in these areas by some or all of the following:

- Workshops on the supervisor-student relationship at our annual conference which may be repeated at other institutions

"...there was an almost zero tolerance of homosexuality within the department ... the student did not feel able to effectively command respect ... he incurred huge penalties, such as the denial of free access to the building and a ban on visitors, all of which were sanctioned by the supervisor"

to be, it is their joint responsibility to foster an effective working relationship. The two cases presented here represent two extremes. Historically, certain disciplines, like humanities and arts have been more conducive to the creation of a comfortable student environment and effective student-supervisor relationships; on the other hand, science and engineering sometimes prove less successful. The bottom line is that a student has a right to a safe and comfortable working environment in which to carry out his or her research.

Naturally, exceptional cases always exist, where the supervisor is also homosexual or just very aware and understanding. It is not possible to cover all scenarios in this article. However, a specific question must be asked: how can the experience of gay, lesbian or bisexual students in research supervision improve? One step may be the highlighting of awareness among supervisors and other academic staff to the issues faced by homosexual or bisexual students. It must also be borne in mind that there are many

- Distribution of fliers and posters highlighting the diversity of research students and their varying needs,
- Planning with the Institute for Learning & Teaching in Higher Education to have workshops and training in place for all supervisors,
- Working with the Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education and all other relevant bodies to increase awareness, and
- Encouraging all universities on the implementation of their equal opportunities policies.

If you have any comments or experiences you'd like to share with the NPC on this topic, please don't hesitate to get in touch. The addresses are on the back cover — and don't forget that you can contact us in complete anonymity via our web site at <http://www.npc.org.uk/>.

Postgraduates and Students' Unions

Nick Bibby argues for a better relationship

There tend to be two schools of thought on the relationships of postgraduates with undergraduate-led Students' Unions. The first says that Unions are just big bars filled with sweating, hormone-filled eighteen-year-olds and that any postgraduate with half a brain should avoid them like the plague. The other line of thought suggests that Unions are doing everything they can to help postgraduates, but that they are a sad collection of whining sociopaths who will never be happy.

Both of these views are incorrect.

Whilst Unions do have an important social role to fulfil (and that tends to be done by appealing to the lowest common denominator), they also have various other opportunities and functions. Furthermore, whilst postgraduates and undergraduates have different tastes and interests, they also share interests as a result of being attached to the same organisation.

Furthermore, with the increase in the number of taught higher degrees, the same resourcing and quality needs which face students in their first degree also face them further through the academic process. In short, whilst there are differences in expectations and interests, there are also significant similarities.

There need to be improvements on both sides — unions need to inform themselves on issues such as intellectual property; but also postgraduates need to interact with their unions, making clear their needs. After all, the bulk of officers — and particularly sabbatical officers — are undergraduates or recent graduates, and will therefore be unaware of the pressures placed on postgrads. It is also worth noting that Unions would benefit enormously from the involvement of postgraduates, since they, by their very nature, have more experience of the higher education process.

In conclusion, the relationships between postgraduates and their representative and service providers requires compromise on both parts, so that all concerned can benefit from the strengths of collective endeavour.

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NUS Hardship Survey

Students' Union officers should very soon be receiving their copies of the NUS' new Hardship Survey. The NUS are particularly interested in gathering information on postgraduate hardship (and there is a section in the survey designed just for this), so we urge all SU officers to please, please fill it in!

Mature Students' Union

The Mature Students Union gives notice of the first of its conferences this year: 27-29 November at the Roscrea Hotel

in Blackpool. The NPC normally sends an official observer due to our liaison arrangements but people may attend as individuals. There is also an *MSU Individual Membership* facility of £10.00 per annum. For details, contact:

*Theresa Conrad, (National Treasurer, MSU),
27 St Johns Court, Calthorpe Road,
Banbury, Oxon, OX16 8HS*

More immediately, *National Mature Students Day* will take place on Friday 6th November. Do contact the MSU if you would like to stage an event for the day in your area.

Diary of a General Secretary (Part Two)

Martin Gough concludes his year as the NPC's *Grand Fromage*

Last issue ran up to the end of June of my term of office. I said then that I would probably be making a flying visit to London again soon after the "campaign" in May and June...

July

I had to wait until the 1st of the month to have an excuse to return. This time it was finally to pin down Phil Willis MP, Lib.Dem. spokes-person on HE, for a chat (on his invitation originally) in the House, about putting postgrad education especially on the Select Committee agenda, then to sit again on the following day on the UKCGE working group on training of postgraduates to teach. In between times I meet up with a representative of beleaguered postgraduates at the Institute of Psychiatry and pass by Wormwood Scrubs to visit the former Royal Postgraduate Medical School (now part of Imperial College, its School of Medicine) postgrads. All the best to them as regards persuading their parent institutions to affiliate to the NPC, I say! A few days later sees our colleague Ewan Gillon launch his seminal project on reviewing the British Ph.D. The NPC will be at the forefront of this: may the Establishment quake! Our very own annual Conference beckons, the highlight of the year. I guess that I have a bit of work to do preparing for the programme, including hunting down more visiting speakers, and, oh, that small task of mailing out the announcement to everybody who is anybody. Nonetheless, I do manage to squeeze in re-drafting our very own *Questions for Prospective Postgraduates* and adapting it for a piece in *International Graduate* and running a session at *NUS National Convention* before the big event.

August

I hope that someone else can sum up the Conference with descriptive content more meaningful than... exhilarating (of course, we were dealing with postgraduate education!) yet exhausting (running conference sessions — no problem, on the other hand... the compulsory soccer — ah, the sheer grace of sending the keeper the wrong way in putting away that penalty kick... and compulsory dancing - not sure about the gracefulness there... not to mention the compulsory early morning hours pool match showdowns...). The rest of the first week of the month I spend sorting out post-Conference

correspondence and other bits and pieces. I officially take the rest of the month off, as my annual holiday, but manage initially to tie this in with a meeting at NUS HQ and dropping in on Queen Mary College SU sabbaticals. I have to escape from the country really to get away.

September

In the first ten days of the month, straight after touching down, I firstly honour an invitation to deliver a keynote address to the Student Wellbeing Conference at Glasgow University. Secondly, I grace with my presence the *NPC Training Weekend* (organised this time most ably by others, in Nottingham, complete with the cosy provision for a dozen bods in the YMCA bunkhouse, following trying to squeeze into the nightclub with main floor smaller than your front room). Thirdly I run a couple of workshops for



NUS for their Best Practice in

Education Work event, held at the *TUC National Education Centre*, and chat to a few SU Education sabbaticals there. I adapt from our Guidelines on taught courses a piece for the third issue of *International Graduate*. I have more liaison meetings in the latter part of the month, and for later in the year, including the handover to my successor, Jeremy, to whom I wish all the best, but my thoughts turn already to the next NPC meeting and preparations for the associated mailing.

So...

It is not easy summarising a whole year of such varied and stimulating activity. One of the important indicators of the worth, as opposed to the quantity, of the activity and industry of the General Secretary is, however, the health of the organisation. I judge that we are in fairly good nick at present. Without the brute, tunnel-visioned intransigence of the powers that be who are obsessed with making undergraduates pay much more for their study as if it was an end in itself, my job this year would have been so much easier. I might then have got round to answering all the queries which came my way, and promptly, but a sizeable proportion of my time has been devoted to campaigning on the issue of implications for funding of postgraduate study arising out of current developments.

I perceive out of this, however, a degree of additional recognition of the NPC's work around the country: people have heard of me! This recognition needs to be translated into raising the level of affiliations to the NPC, however. I am pleased that the income from this, our main, source is actually up on last year, but not yet near enough to our projections agreed at the last AGM. The fact remains that the more time we spend campaigning nationally the less time we have to chat up current and potential affiliates. My infrequent, often hastily arranged at the last minute, visits to student unions around the country have on the whole been met with pleasure at the understanding that a representative from a national body is interested. I am then frustrated by the lack of opportunity to maintain contact of this sort.

This can change if we have a significantly larger turnover, such as to employ the giddy number of as much as two whole people rather than just the one, which is a goal of the NPC's internal *Strategy Review* when it reported last year. To do this we need those extra affiliations. Student Union officers should not ignore this demand and hope that it will go away. This is not because it won't go away: as far as the NPC's efforts are concerned it may well do, resources devoted to persisting with enquiries into whether a cheque is in the post having to give way to priority campaigning issues, *la raison d'être de cette organisation*. I suspect that such officers kid themselves, however, if they think that their own postgraduate members are not interested and not making any noise. They would be simply listening in the wrong place. There being a lull in salient postgraduate activity is an excuse I have heard too often this year for turning away from the NPC. On the contrary, such a lull ought to be taken as just the sort of concern appropriate for investigation with the NPC's help. The NPC has always embraced the mission to boldly go and seek out postgraduates in need in the furthest corners of the UK H.E. universe. It should continue to do so. But putting NPC resources into projects being run in institutions to this end demands continual financial commitment on the part of those institutions as a pre-condition, with no questions asked about the principle.

Overall, however, I have relished the challenges of the job, the frustrations as well as the more rewarding attentions. I would even be prepared to do the job for more than just the one year! Unfortunately I have had little time to prepare for life after Gen Sec., but at least I shall have the NPC to look after me in the sense of keeping me occupied in my new role as Chair...

The London Consortium: A Virtual Institution

Lucy Reed looks at an unusual research environment

The London Consortium is a unique institution providing a unique taught masters and Ph.D. programme. Just about to produce its first PhDs three years after its inception, several important questions about the future of postgrads study in the humanities and other disciplines have been raised — and not all of them answered....



In 1995 several academics and other prominent institutional bodies working in various areas of the humanities disciplines got together to create a course which attempted to tackle issues of interdisciplinarity within the humanities and its implications for research methods. For many students fed up with the preciousness of rigid categorisation within the humanities the course was intended to allow students to explore the ways in which interdisciplinary research could function in and across the humanities.

The taught parts of the course make up a pretty impressive array and draw on the expertise of a network of experts from several London Institutions normally not accessible to students without contacts. This is only possible because of the virtual nature of the London Consortium. The Consortium has no fixed abode, it has a small staff and student body, with a large and impressive visiting faculty. It runs itself on a break even basis entirely from the revenue brought in from student fees and has a comparatively high level of success with applications for the HRB funds. Students have access not only to people but to cultural resources all over London. And all this is made possible because the London Consortium is a virtual institution.

So how does it work? There are four “parent bodies” involved in the Consortium. Each put in £2,000 set up costs and since then has shared the responsibilities of teaching, supervision, resource accessing, administration... *Birkbeck College, University of London* houses the course Chair Paul Hirst and is involved in several of the taught courses — The Satanic Verses, Kant... Degrees are awarded by the University of London and students are registered with Birkbeck. *The Tate Gallery* provides access to the resources in the Tate, through its Education Department and runs the *Contemporary Art & The Museum* unit. The British Film Institute allows students access to the second biggest film and television research library in Europe, and the *National Film Theatre* and gives teaching on Indian Cinema. The *BFI* is the administrative centre of the consortium. The *Architectural Association* again provides



access to a useful resource of architectural literature and teaches on Kant and “The Prestige of Whiteness”. Other Institutions like the *Institute of Contemporary Art* are also involved in individual units. Each taught unit is based upon reciprocity and the involvement of several institutions and faculty members. Whilst students undoubtedly benefit from such an arrangement which allows them to resource so widely, the difficulties of making contact with tutors who are heads of prominent London Institutions before they are academics can be frustrating. Such high profile tutors are hard pressed for time and it has not been unknown for students to have to face tutorials with a certain individual from the Institute of Contemporary Art in the back of a London Cab on the way to the BBC!

The four taught units (undertaken by all MRes and all 1st year Ph.Ds) attempt to span several areas of the humanities and to approach each subject from an interdisciplinary perspective. Because of the nature of the course, intake tends to be from wide range of backgrounds — English Literature Graduates, Architects, Painters, Community Photographers, Art Historians, Politics teachers, Media Studies Graduates... For students undertaking a course unit which is not their speciality or with which they are not familiar, often questions of interdisciplinary research methods are raised and left unanswered. The practical difficulties of embarking on a 6 week unit with no prior knowledge of the area and producing a piece of work of postgraduate standard at the end are huge. The courses have to assume a prior knowledge as a benchmark, but this tends to leave students familiar with the subject frustrated and those unfamiliar confused. There is no denying that on such a course the expectations of students are very very high.

The question arises as to whether the aim of the course is to broaden a students’ knowledge to enhance research capabilities and complement existing expertise, or to give students the opportunity to break away from their area of specialism and use the skills they have to research in a new but related area. Again the practicalities of such hedge hopping have yet to be worked out.

The notion of a virtual Institution is itself something to be looked at. There are undoubtedly marvelous benefits to be had for students by virtue of being linked to so many prominent institutions (and the significance of the London locations should not be forgotten) but on top of the already high levels of isolation which are experienced by many

postgrads, Consortium students are left with no geographical location for study or socialising, widely dispersed tutors who can be difficult to track down, no campus accommodation, and difficulties with administration of the course. Students do not feel they are part of a particular institution and by extension an academic community of postgrads. That said, it should be acknowledged that the students compensate for this by meshing together well and providing a supportive network for each other, sharing ideas and problems. That is not to say there are no problems with communication — students from extreme ends of the interdisciplinary catchment area often find they have no common ground, no understanding of the way the other works. Interdisciplinarity is hard to maintain.

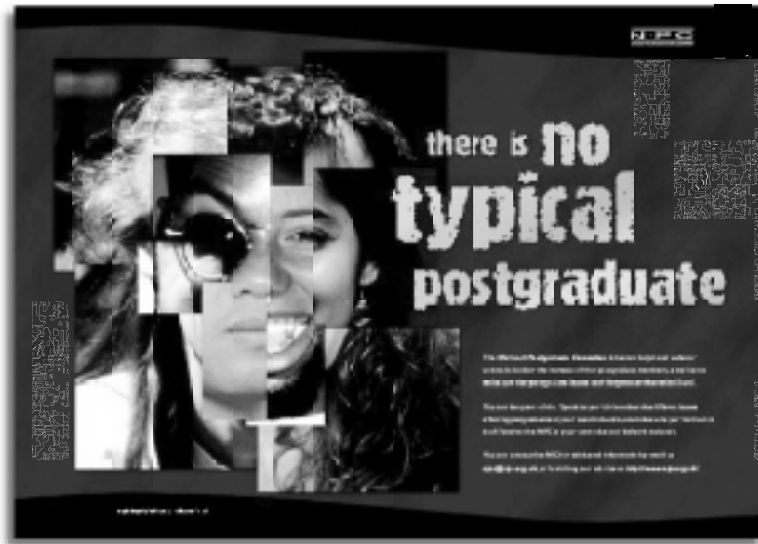
The London Consortium is readdressing its position after three years, unsure of the implications of expansion. There are plans to introduce an element of cultural work placement, and to re-emphasise the one of the original aims of the course — to encourage students to move away from rigid traditional notions of what a Ph.D. should be — perhaps moving away from the text based traditional format to experiment with other media. Again the practicalities of this are difficult to surmount, the University of London will not award a Ph.D. for anything other than 100,000 words or so of solid text, and assessment of work placements of PhDs is a potential nightmare.

Hopefully though, the course will prove itself to be a success when the first doctorates are awarded. Many of its original aims have been met, but the Consortium will have to readdress these aims and evolve to survive. A process of evolution which does not involve a move away from the virtual towards the concrete seems unlikely, but that virtuality has been the centre of the whole project. The Consortium has so far provided around 60 students so far with uniquely interdisciplinary teaching, access to resources and interaction which could not have been possible without the existence of a virtual institution, but the problems of virtuality have yet to be ironed out.

Whether the Consortium remains virtual or not, it is time it began to look at the concrete issues and practicalities which dog students’ every step. That said, its been a long slog, but the MRes is almost complete, and the Ph.D. beckons...

Lucy Reed is the President of Birkbeck Students’ Union, and is the London Regional Rep for the NPC.





The NPC's new poster campaign, pictured above, is being distributed now. Intended to prompt postgraduates to get in touch with their own students' unions, as well as promoting the name and image of the NPC itself, the poster is a glossy A3 full-colour affair featuring a special design by *Article Seven*. Please display the poster wherever you can!

Contacting the NPC

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

Jeremy Hoad, General Secretary,
National Postgraduate Committee,
11 Onley Street, Norwich
Norfolk, NR2 2EA

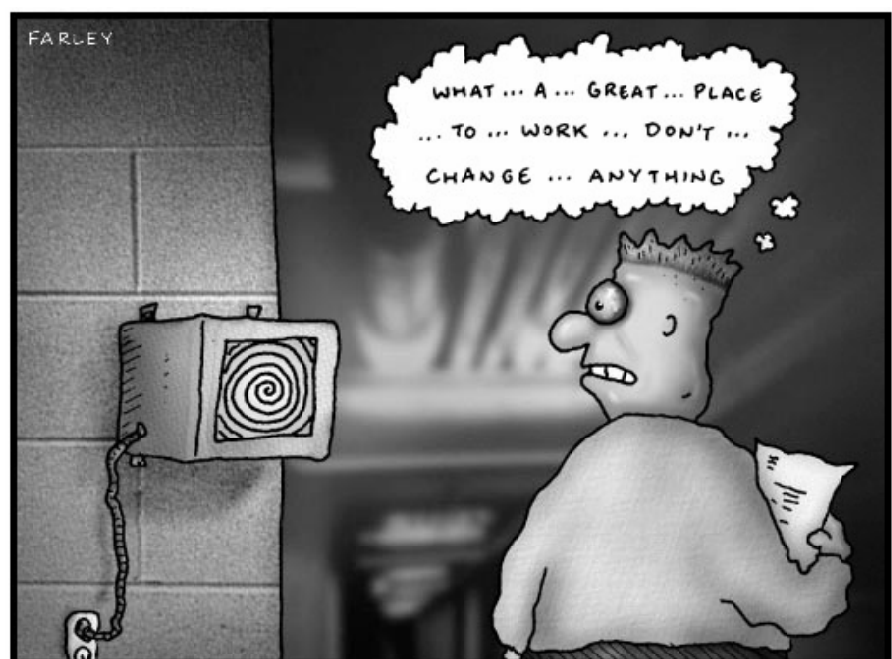
Tel/Fax: 01603 473487

Email: npc@npc.org.uk

You can also contact us directly (and, if you prefer, anonymously) through our web site, which also features information on the NPC, our events and publications, together with an on-line version of *Newsletter*, and an easy way to subscribe to our email mailing lists. Just fire-up any web browser and visit <http://www.npc.org.uk/>

DOCTOR FUN

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



Subliminal suggestion box.