

DEARING

Special Edition

In this special edition of the *NPC Newsletter*, we explore the implications and recommendations of the *Dearing Committee of Enquiry into Higher Education*, whose report was published at the end of July.

The Dearing Committee was established in May 1996, with all-party support, to take higher education off the political agenda until after the General Election. The main reason for its creation was the funding crisis that faced, and still faces, higher education institutions.

The number of home undergraduates has increased by over 70% since 1984, and the number of postgraduates has more than doubled since 1989, with 1.6 million students studying for degrees and diplomas in the UK. This has been accompanied by a shift in the nature of higher education, with nearly a third of students now studying part-time, and over half the number of students being mature.

But this expansion hasn't been accompanied by a similar increase in resources. Over the last six years, public funding per student has been cut by 28%, with further cuts to follow. And although in 1994/5 the Government introduced controls on the number of full-time undergraduates to prevent further expansion, the funding per student is still decreasing.

This has cost universities — both students and staff — dearly. Evidence of the pressure on the quality of provision includes the falling quality of libraries, inadequate seminar and teaching group facilities, and an estimated £1.25 billion backlog of buildings maintenance. The HE sector estimates a likely 2-3000 job losses for 1996/97, with each staff member having a responsibility for an average 40% more students than in 1989.

What effect might the recommendations of the Enquiry have upon postgraduates?

Dearing Ignores Postgraduates

Jamie Darwen looks at the proposals for student financial support, and the effects they might have on postgraduates

After months of speculation, the Government announced its plans for tuition fees within hours of the publication of the Dearing report on 23rd July.

Tuition fee: a £1,000 fee will be introduced, but this will be means tested on family income:

over £35,000	full £1,000 fee
£16,000 – £35,000	proportion of fee
under £16,000	no fee

Living costs: the current grant/loan system will be replaced by an income contingent loan of the same amount, but a means tested parental contribution will remain. The parental contribution to maintenance will be reduced according to the fee, so the total parental contribution will remain the same; the maintenance loan will increase by the same amount.

Using current figures (for outside London) what this means is given in the table below:

What effect might all this have on postgraduates? The Government has so far failed to consider how postgraduates might fit into this funding system. The Dearing report itself doesn't do much better; it largely ignores the question of postgraduate funding, believing that current mechanisms work OK. This is unfortunate. Last year's Harris report did not consider financial support for postgraduate students, and recommended that Dearing would have to do so.

The *National Postgraduate Committee* raised two issues which the Dearing report attempts to address — but fails.

1: If students leave their first degree saddled with a huge debt (maybe £10,000 – £15,000 under the current proposals), this is going to be a real disincentive to carry on into postgraduate study. The likelihood of accumulating further debt (especially for those paying their own fees) could leave students with £30,000 or more of debt after three years of

postgraduate study. The debt carried on could also prejudice chances of getting a *professional studies loan* or *Career Development Loan*.

Dearing misses the point completely here. He believes that the concern is about postgraduates paying off an undergraduate loan while they are postgraduate students. A repayment system with a reasonable threshold before repayments are required will address this, so postgraduates do not have to repay while they are still studying. The problem is not this but the accumulated debt after six or seven years study, which Dearing does not consider at all.

2: The majority of postgraduates pay their own fees, and receive no grant or any source of funding. The NPC has argued that postgraduates should be able to take out a student loan for maintenance, as undergraduates can, to help fund their study. Dearing argues that the funding systems for postgraduates work adequately at the moment, and that an extension of the loans system for postgraduates is not a priority as the *Career Development Loan* scheme exists to meet this need.

However, only students on certain vocational courses are eligible for *Career Development Loans*. Some other loan schemes exist, but most postgraduates will not be able to get help from any of these. Many postgraduates make huge financial sacrifices to do their courses, and current funding arrangements do not go anywhere near meeting the needs of these people.

The NPC will be making representations to Government expressing these concerns, and others, as part of the consultation process following the Dearing report. If you would like to contribute to the NPC's response, please get in touch with the General Secretary before or during the Conference.

The Current System

	Better off	Middle	Worse off
Maintenance grant	£0	£877	£1,755
Maintenance loan	£1,685	£1,685	£1,685
Parental contribution (maintenance)	£1,755	£878	£0
Total public support for maintenance	£1,685	£2,562	£3,440
Parental contribution to fees	£0	£0	£0

The New System

	Better off	Middle	Worse off
Maintenance grant	£0	£0	£0
Maintenance loan	£2,685	£3,440	£3,440
Parental contribution (maintenance)	£755	£0	£0
Total public support for maintenance	£2,685	£3,440	£3,440
Parental contribution to fees	£1,000	£878	£0

Structure, Quality and Standards

John Gray examines some of the general recommendations of the Dearing Report

Arts & Humanities Research Council

The Dearing report recommended the creation of an *Arts and Humanities Research Council* — this will take over the work of the *Humanities Research Board* of the *British Academy*, and will have £20m of extra funds to support research in the arts. (This has been NPC policy for several years.)

Code of Practice

The Dearing report proposes a *Code of Practice* for postgraduate training, in line with the recommendations of *Harris*, and accepts that the *Research Assessment Exercise* is not the sole measure of the quality of a research training environment. It still supports the “spirit” of the recommendation that funding for postgraduates should only go to departments with good RAE ratings.

Description of courses

Dearing proposes a standardisation of nomenclature and levels of awards (both postgraduate and undergraduate), along a similar framework to the *Harris* report. In addition, institutions are to be encouraged to develop “programme specifications” for all courses, which describe areas such as key skills obtained, expected outcomes (including any intermediate stopping-off points). The position of the MPhil should be strengthened — it must be seen as a valuable qualification in its own right (it is sometimes seen as a “failed PhD”).

Institute of Teaching and learning

University teachers should receive proper training and accreditation through an *Institute of Teaching*

and *Learning*. All lecturers would be expected to reach the level of associate member of this institute by the end of their probationary year. In the longer term, the Institute would cover other aspects of academic practice — this would hopefully include research student supervision.

Financial issues

Dearing recommends that *Research Councils* should start to pay the full “indirect” costs (staff, premises, computing) of the projects they support.

Research Assessment Exercise

The report also proposes that departments should have an alternative to engaging in the RAE (which may not always be worthwhile). A department will be able to claim £500-a-year for each full-time academic in order to pay for scholarship and research, if it chooses not to enter the RAE.

If it does enter the RAE, and receives a rating of *3a* or above, it will receive formula funding as at present. If it gets a *3b*, it will receive the fixed sum described above. If it gets a *1* or *2* it will receive absolutely no money.

Obviously this, in conjunction with the *Harris* review’s recommendation to restrict funding for postgraduate students, will reduce access to postgraduate education and lead to a concentration of research in a small number of institutions. The report itself appears to suggest that some institutions should see themselves as primarily teaching-oriented.

Industrial Partnership Development Fund

The existing medley of schemes to promote academic-industrial collaboration (*LINK*, *CASE*, *ROPA* and many others) are to be amalgamated into a single *Industrial Partnership Development Fund*. This would meet half the costs of a collaborative project — the other half would come from the industrial partner.

Infrastructure Fund

A rolling loan fund of £500,000,000 is to be set up, which will grant institutions low-interest loans to improve their research infrastructure; the repayments are to be recovered from the money they receive for performing research. However, this fund is apparently to be targeted at departments which already have high research ratings.

Contacting the NPC

John Gray, the NPC’s General Secretary, is always on hand to answer any questions or to discuss any of the issues the NPC is dealing with. You can reach him at: Aston Students’ Guild, Aston Triangle, Birmingham, B4 7ES. Telephone: 0121 554 5614. Or, you can email him at the NPC’s new address: npc@npc.org.uk — more about which in the next issue!

Don’t forget you can find out more about the NPC’s work through our site on the World-Wide Web:

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

(and we’ll have some exciting news about *that* in our next issue as well!!)

Don't Forget!

The *NPC Conference* is coming up shortly, to be held in The Pollock Halls, University of Edinburgh, from Thursday 11 to Sunday 14 September.

The theme for this year's conference is to be *Postgraduate Futures*, and presents us with an opportunity to assess the future of postgraduate life, and also to look at the future of the NPC, as the results of our Strategic Review are revealed.



Your £130 full conference registration fee buys you bed & breakfast accommodation for Thursday, Friday and Saturday, with all meals provided from Thursday dinner to Saturday dinner, including the *NPC Annual Dinner* on Friday night — and, of course, attendance at any of the varied conference sessions. There will also be a full social programme!

**So what are you waiting for?
Book now!**

The Social Sciences Grapevine

Richard Ballerand reveals the plans for a new internet service for researchers

Starting in October 1997, *Grapevine* will provide a unique source of news about job and training opportunities for social science researchers. It will include adverts for research jobs and for training events. Researchers will be able to publicise their CVs. *Grapevine* will also provide an introduction service for those offering work and those seeking work. And it will aim to cover opportunities in all the sectors — business, academic, government, non-profit — where social science researchers work. *Grapevine* should be the essential information source for researchers keen to develop their skills and advance their careers.

Grapevine will operate as a web site on the internet. Its URL will be:

<http://www.grapevine.bris.ac.uk/>

It will be regularly updated and accessible round the clock. Information will be presented in standard formats, so that it can be searched by preferred location, discipline or sector of work. The service will be free to users.

Current information will be available through *Grapevine* on:

- research post vacancies
- researchers' CVs
- work sought by researchers
- work offered by research projects
- training providers
- training events

The service will be actively marketed to advertisers — employers, trainers and researchers — before and after its launch. For an initial period advertisements will be free. Later, there will be charges which will be competitive with other media. Above all, *Grapevine* will offer advertisers access to a wide market in the social science research community.

The *Grapevine* project is being developed by *William Solesbury & Associates*, and the *Institute for Learning and Research Technology*, Bristol University. Development funding has been provided by the *Economic and Social Research Council*, with widespread support.

For further information about *Grapevine*, visit the web site from early September. Otherwise, contact William Solesbury on 0171 736 2155, fax 0171 731 8355, or email was@solesbury.demon.co.uk.

DOCTOR FUN

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

