

Hello everyone, Happy New Year and welcome to the first edition of *pn* for 2005 and the first edition of *pn* that I've had the pleasure of editing.

My name's John Grainger and I am, as you may have guessed, the new NPC Communications Officer 2004/05. When not performing this role I'm a first year postgraduate representative at Edinburgh University studying molecular biology. You can learn more about me and the rest of the new executive in this edition of *pn*, hopefully not too traumatic an experience.

Also in this edition you can find out what happened at the launch of the higher education academy, hear our esteemed General Secretary, Jim Ewing's, thoughts on the year ahead and get to grips with what the code of practice for research degrees means to postgrads.

To keep yourself updated with all things NPC don't forget to visit our superb website, www.npc.org.uk and browse to your heart's content.

Hope that all you *pn* readers have a great 2005 and please send any ideas for articles or, even better, complete articles for the next issue of *pn* to me, comms@npc.org.uk by 25th February 2005. Bye until the next issue.



Visa Charges

As UK undergraduates are increasingly wary about commencing postgraduate courses while already saddled with debt, our universities are growing ever more dependent on overseas postgraduate students to justify employing research staff in certain areas, keeping some undergraduate courses and even whole subject areas viable. Prime Minister Tony Blair wants more overseas students studying here; Scottish First Minister Jack McConnell even wants them to stay permanently. And how does the Home Office propose to encourage this? By doubling visa extension charges. Joined-up government, or what?

These increases, proposed for April, would make it more expensive for overseas graduands whose visas expire a few months, or even weeks, before graduation to remain in the country for their ceremony than it would to take out British citizenship. Carefully-planned budgets will be

ruined. Students whose progress to the next level of study depends on results at their current level may find they can go no further. Applicants not guaranteed places for PhD courses following masters may look elsewhere in the global market.

The recent increase in the number of overseas students in the UK is astonishing: only a minority of full-time taught masters students at UK HEIs are UK citizens, and 48% are from outside the EU, more in the newer universities. And of course, they spend billions while here. And why are the charges being proposed? Officially, to cover costs but, if it deters people from coming here in the first place, it is rather a false economy. It also comes pretty close on the heels of tabloid-induced outrage at the number of bogus students gaining visas for non-existent courses.

If this proposal goes ahead, the Gov-

ernment will wreck its own vision for postgraduate education, merely to keep the tabloid mob at bay. Reports of non-existent language schools may be accurate, but the way to deal with the problem is to check on their existence and accreditation, which is easily done. Stopping people coming to our universities is not the answer.

The proposed increases should be abandoned. As a PhD usually takes four years from initial matriculation to graduation, a visa should be issued for that time as a general rule, removing the need for extensions in most cases. Arguably, students should be exempted from visa charges altogether, as is already the case for council tax — especially as some student unions submit applications in batches, saving the Home Office much of the labour - and cost. After all, it should not be too difficult for the Government to list all the real universities in the country.

Meet the Executive

At the NPC Annual Conference a new executive was elected to manage the NPC for 2004/05.

General Secretary: Jim Ewing

A product and stout defender of the comprehensive system, Jim graduated with honours in Arts from the University of Glasgow in 1983, then took a qualification in the teaching of English as a foreign language (TEFL) from Basil Paterson College, Edinburgh in 1984. After six months in Greece and twelve years in Spain, he returned to Glasgow to fulfil his ambition of studying Divinity and to prove his theory that he would learn from his mistakes the second time round. He must have done, to be accepted part-time for a research masters in Theology in 2000, finally graduating in July of this year. When he turned up at the university chapel for the graduation service, the Chaplain asked him what he was coming back to do next. Little did he know...

Jim believes he finds the NPC in a good condition. Under his predecessor, Dr. Tim Brown, the NPC co-operated with the QAA (Quality Assurance Association) in drafting its supervision guidelines. "Now the task is to see that those guidelines be implemented - and that the Scottish QAA bring in sensible guidelines also."

Issues on Jim's agenda for the next year include:

- Concentration of research funding, "Why should funding be concentrated in the south-eastern corner of the UK? Giving the lion's share of research funding to 5* past performers will not allow new institutions to develop expertise in their chosen fields of research. It may be riskier - and more work - to fund the most meritorious proposals, no matter which institutes they come from, but it would give new institutions a chance to prove themselves and keep older ones alert."
- MBA cash cows, "Specific concerns have been raised that overseas students with inadequate English are being accepted onto MBA courses, then failed. This needs investigating."
- Visa charges, "The postgraduate sector especially is more and more dependent on overseas students. Doubling visa charges under the present regime will play havoc with current budgets and future applications."

Jim hopes to welcome more members to NPC this year and to raise its profile through greater use of the media. "If we don't draw attention to ourselves, it's our own fault if no-one has heard of us."

Chairperson: Tim Roll-Pickering

Tim is originally from Surrey and studied for a History BA and MA at the University of Kent, during which time he first became involved with the NPC. He served for two years as Treasurer and is now Chairperson. Currently, Tim is

researching a PhD in History at Queen Mary, University of London.

Treasurer: Christabel Silva

Christabel is from India and is Academic Officer at Middlesex University Students' Union.

Minutes Secretary: Dr James Groves

James is now into his third term as Minutes Secretary, having failed to find anyone else willing to take this position on at the 2004 AGM! He's been involved with the NPC since 1997, as a Project Officer, Treasurer and (from 2000 - 2002) full-time General Secretary. He was a PhD student in Pure Maths at the University of Lancaster from 1996 - 2000, and still lives and works in Lancaster.

Communications Officer:

John Grainger

John is in his first year studying for a PhD in Molecular Biology at Edinburgh University. Originally from Birmingham, he has spent the past three years as an undergraduate at University College, London. When not in the lab John can often be found playing some form of musical instrument or participating, usually badly, in a wide variety of sports.

Equal Opportunities Officer:

Paulet Brown

Paulet comes from the Bahamas. She has lived and worked in the US and is now studying at the Institute of Education, University of London.

Project Officer: Andre Oboler

Andre is an international student from Australia studying for a PhD in computing at Lancaster University. He is a Postgraduate student Rep on the Lancaster University Students' Union, an ex-VP of the Graduate Students' Association, a General Teaching Assistant, Co-Chair of the Lancaster University Jewish Society and last but certainly not least, an NPC Project Officer doing work in the area of postgraduates who teach. His PhD involves explaining why almost everyone doing research in computing is building software all wrong, and how they could do it better - and if you can think of a topic more likely to make enemies of potential colleagues and examiners, please let him know!

If you have issues or ideas relating to postgraduates as teachers please e-mail Andre at: obo1er@comp.lancs.ac.uk

Project Officer: Dries Neirynek

Dries is a final year PhD student at the University of Bristol, where he was the President and Chair of the local Postgraduate Society/Union. In his second year as NPC Project Officer, he will provide training sessions before formal meetings on a variety of issues related to postgraduates and representation.

Project Officer: Berrihan Abbas

Beri is the Societies, Postgraduate, International Officer at Cardiff University Students' Union.

Project Officer: Dr Tim Brown

As past General Secretary, Tim is now back in his engineering career working at Aalborg University in Denmark. While over there he has time to sit at his laptop writing useful publications and other helpful resources for NPC, which he has given his time to as a Project Officer this year.

Ordinary Executive Officer:

Harpreet Singh

Harpreet is a postgraduate from Aston Business School at Aston University and has been involved with the NPC for the last 3 years and has also served as Vice-president at Aston previously. He sits on the executive committee of National Black Students and National Overseas Students and has been actively involved in national campaigns with NUS. This year, he was elected on the board of EuroDoc and thus not only represents UK postgrads, but postgrads all over Europe. On the NPC executive, his role is to ensure that everyone "behaves" and things go by the right procedures. However, his more important role is to provide some fun, humour and nonsense to an otherwise sensible organisation.

Ordinary Executive Officer:

Marilyn Shanks

Marilyn is one of the Ordinary Officers of the NPC, which means that she's a watchdog. Her studies are in the area of Plant Molecular Biology at the

University of Essex, where she's also the Postgraduate Students' Officer and Chair of the Postgraduate Students' Assembly. She would like to see postgraduates getting a better deal from their Unions through better representation and better access to funding of postgraduate activities. Previously she has been involved with the NPC as a project officer from 2002-2004.

Chairperson NPC Scotland:

Maggie Chapman

Maggie is a second year PhD student at Edinburgh University researching Animal Geographies and Conservation Ethics. Originally from Zimbabwe, she came to Edinburgh to study Zoology as an undergraduate, going on to Stirling University for an MSc in Environmental Management. She is involved in postgraduate representation within EU SRC, and is currently looking into quality assurance issues facing postgraduate tutors and demonstrators and their students, and training resources/facilities, among other academic and funding concerns. When not at work, she is actively involved in campaigns for social and environmental justice. When time permits she is also a violinist and keen cyclist.

Launch of the Higher Education Academy

The Higher Education Academy has been set up to begin the monitoring and accreditation of teaching standards in higher education institutions. NPC supports this move and is keen to help it develop further not only for teaching quality in postgraduate education but also to support postgraduates who teach. On Monday October 18th, NPC Chairperson Tim Roll-Pickering attended the London launch of the Higher Education Academy.

The launch began with an introduction by the Chair, Professor Leslie Wagner, who outlined the task of the Academy “to refocus Higher Education to focus on the student experience” and explained how this would be achieved.

Next the Chancellor of the University of Sunderland, Lord Puttnam of Queensgate, spoke. His long CV includes a period serving as Chairman of BAFTA (British Academy of Film and Television Arts) so he surmised that he had been chosen to speak as he knows “a thing about academies!”. He is also the founder and Chair of Trustees of the National Teaching Awards, and the first Chair of the General Teaching Councils. Welcoming the

creation of the Academy, which he believed was “way overdue”, he commented on how the student experience differs widely from one campus to another and the importance of widening participation, noting the “astounding regenerative effects” that education can have on wider society.

The meeting then heard from Professor Paul Ramsden, the Chief Executive of the Academy. A leading international writer in the field of university lecturing and teaching as well as a former Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Learning and Teaching) at the University of Sydney, he talked about how the Academy will achieve its “high moral purpose” to “provide an exceptional environment to help educational establishments”. As with other speakers he displayed full awareness of the importance of the student experience in everything that the Academy will do, and stressed the need to look beyond the “traditional image of a student sitting in a classroom or behind a computer screen”. He also promised that the Academy will not seek to duplicate existing provision, whilst explaining that he does not support compulsion for every academic to be

accredited. In addition he emphasised that the Academy will substantially increase its commitment to research.

All of these speakers stressed the UK wide nature of the Academy, explaining that it will adapt its activities to suit the needs of each of the four nations in the United Kingdom. As part of this, launches were held in Belfast, London, Edinburgh and Cardiff.

The final speaker was Dr. Kim Howells MP, the newly appointed Minister for Higher Education. In a highly positive speech he focused on both the importance of widening participation and the implications of professional standards, as well as on the importance of always keeping the student experience at the forefront of the activities. NPC has previously met with both of Dr Howells’ immediate predecessors and it is hoped that we will be able to secure a meeting with him in the near future.

With the Academy now launched, attention shifts to the way in which it achieves its aims. NPC will be following and acting on all key developments so watch this space.

Conference 2004 Report — PG: Suitable for All?

The NPC Annual Conference this year took place at Coventry University from the 12th-15th August 2004 with the title “PG: Suitable for all?”. The key part of the conference focused on postgraduates in light of higher education reform. Not only had the higher education bill been passed but there were many other developments moving on from the higher education white paper. Most notably there has been continuous discussion over research and teaching links, as well as the new Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) code of practice for research degrees — both of which NPC have been heavily involved in over the past year.

Speakers included:

- Dr Ian Gibson, Chair of the Science and Technology Select Committee of the House of Commons. The input from Dr Gibson was an excellent kick start to the conference bringing out the good, the bad and the ugly of a long overdue debate to address the ever growing needs in higher education. Good news was the entrance of the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC), this will much improve support for research and postgraduates in the arts and humanities. On the bad side, he raised his immense concern over top up fees, where the focus has been too biased to undergraduates with little attention paid to how the impact of fees will be a threat to

continuation of study at postgraduate level.

- Dr Steve Wharton, Vice President of the Association of University Teachers (AUT) gave the perspective from his own lecturers union on current government agenda in higher education. Topics raised included whether we should engage with the general public on higher education issues, and the unfair consideration of “Mickey Mouse” degrees as described by government.
- Gill Clarke and Janet Bohrer of the Quality Assurance Agency, who addressed attendees on the institutional audit process and how students play an important role in conveying the student perceptions of an institution. They also discussed the new code of practice, which NPC played a significant role in developing. This code incorporates a range of standards including supervision, training and complaints mechanisms for research students. The presentation gave a useful overview of how the code of practice had come together and how it would then be used for institutions to re-implement their own codes of practice – a process in which input from postgraduate representatives will be essential.
- Ellen Pearce, the manager of the UK GRAD Programme, a centre of excellence for training in research. NPC has had a long standing relationship with them over the years helping to constantly improve the

training of postgraduate research students. This presentation discussed the results of a survey of personal development planning (PDP) considering how few students were identifying PDP to assist their training needs or ascertain qualities they can cite on their CV.

- Dame Ruth Deech, Office of the Independent Adjudicator (OIA), gave an impacting presentation on the second day of the conference with an introduction to the office and how it intends to fulfil its role in higher education. Dame Ruth recognised the difficulties associated with postgraduate research programmes, identifying thesis rejection, exam conduct and quality of supervision as causing immense problems to the research student.

Other highlights of the conference were a wide range of training sessions and informative seminars as well as the annual general meeting which included the election of the new executive.

The past General Secretary, Tim Brown, said at the end of the conference: “This goes to show the importance of why NPC needs to exist. I am so encouraged when all NPC’s work and people come together at our conference to give us positive support in what we are doing. I look forward to seeing how more will make use of our support and resources.”

New Code of Practice for Research Degrees Released

In September 2004, the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), the body dedicated to ensuring academic quality in higher education, released a new code of practice for research degrees. Over the past 8 months, NPC has been heavily involved in the process of bringing this code together, playing an important role on the working group as well as drafting some sections of the code and carefully monitoring others. This part of NPC's activity clearly shows the necessity for us to exist and the benefit of our work to postgraduates across the UK. No other body could engage the interests of postgraduates on a national level in the way that NPC has to ensure the code is student focussed. Producing the code has allowed us to develop a good working relationship with the QAA and all others involved. The task now for NPC is to make postgraduate representatives aware of what this code is about and how it can be best used in the interests of postgraduate research students.

All higher education institutions will need to implement their own codes of practice for research degrees in order to comply with minimum requirements, failure to do so will have funding implications. Involvement of

postgraduate representatives in developing institutional codes is vital in this process as although NPC has ensured the code is student focussed its use and application need not necessarily be so.

The code consists of 9 main sections which are, institutional arrangements, research environment, admissions, supervision, review of progress, training, feedback mechanisms, assessment and complaints and appeals. The admissions section has been significantly influenced by NPC, we have drafted many of the details relating to successful inductions, this has had implications for a great deal of the code further down the line. In addition to this, supervision has also been of interest to us along with fair complaints and appeals procedures — not having to complain to the supervisor's friend next door if problems arise. Another important point to note for student bodies is that representation is a key factor in the new code, this has not had major consideration previously and so more formally structured feedback is now needed. If you want to know more about the code, please email Tim Brown on tim@brown76.name.

 the national postgraduate committee

The National Postgraduate Committee is an independent charity that represents and promotes the needs of UK postgraduates on a national and international stage voicing your opinions to the funding councils, review boards, academic bodies, the media, the government and other relevant bodies. Comprising postgraduate representatives from over 40 institutions and managed by an elected full time general secretary and a team of elected part time officers the NPC forms a national support network issuing UK universities and colleges with up to date guidelines and advice on current affairs. These range from recommended provisions of facilities to the instigation of learning contracts. Through regular OGMs and mailing lists the NPC fulfils the role of a national postgraduate forum providing formal responses to government and non-government papers and proposals. The needs of students in Scottish and Welsh institutions are also catered for by the NPC's Scottish and Welsh Subcommittees.

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Constitutional Subcommittee:
Tim Roll-Pickering, Chris Neville-Smith, Andre Oboler, Peter Campbell, Jim Ewing, James Groves.

New Resource Folder Released

At long last, the second edition of the NPC's resource folder is now available online. All affiliates and individual donors are allowed direct access to the folder online at www.npc.org.uk/essentials. Links under "About Postgraduates", "Supporting Postgraduates" and "Resources" are where the vast majority of the new resources have been written, by Tim Brown. You can find anything, from support information for postgraduates considering complaints and appeals, through to information on how to radically improve support and representation for postgraduates. NPC hopes in the near future to print off an "upgrade kit" to send to affiliates to change their current folder to the new edition. Likewise other hardcopies of the new folder will be available for sale with a reduced rate for affiliates.

New Publication on Personal Development Planning for Postgraduates

Another highly successful project undertaken jointly with the UK GRAD Programme, www.grad.ac.uk, and the Centre for Recording Achievement, www.recordingachievement.org, has been on both institutional and user perceptions of personal development planning (PDP) for postgraduate research students. The review was commissioned by UK GRAD in response to a number of enquiries from higher education institutions about good practice in this field. The main bulk of this project was to seek emerging points of good practice both from institutional surveys and also gaining results from individual students.

NPC's main role in this project was to set up an online survey for research students to respond to. Over 1300 responses were received so we are grateful to all institutions who helped in this and the Alumni from UK GRAD. The information was put up against findings from institutions to try and identify areas of personal development planning that are strong and also weak. Much work of focus groups and other activities are continuing to follow up this project with some key findings produced in a short written report available to download at www.npc.org.uk/essentials/publications. Another more detailed report of the research student survey will also be available in this directory in the near future.