

Welcome to a delayed but bumper edition of the *pn* newsletter. It has been a busy time for the NPC over the last few months with several government policies directing the NPC's agenda such as Visa charges and Visa Points and the reduction in the budget to the research councils. Alongside this there has been an industrial tribunal which has the potential to affect student-supervisor relations and individual support to students and student officers with several institutions seeking to change regulations and procedures for postgraduate students.

As with every *pn* we look forward to hearing about your successes and achievements in enhancing the postgraduate experience and if you would like to write an article please email your responses to the General Secretary on [npc@npc.org.uk](mailto:npc@npc.org.uk).

The next few months look promising as we move into the next OGM and then the AGM at Keele University in August. There will be elections and a new General Secretary will need to be elected for the new academic year. If you are interested in any of the committee positions or would like to know more please email Simon Felton on [npc@npc.org.uk](mailto:npc@npc.org.uk).

## NPC Conference 2007

Thursday 9th – Saturday 11th August 2007, Keele University

The NPC Annual Conference takes place over three days with the first two mainly speaker and workshops and the Saturday the Annual General Meeting. Our conference is the main event of the year where the majority of NPC's work is seen in a physical capacity.

### Who is it aimed at?

The Conference is aimed at new and existing sabbatical officers, postgraduate officers, university staff responsible for supporting postgraduates and managers of student representative bodies.

*Attending NPC conference as a sabbatical officer who had only ever done an undergraduate degree was a real eye-opener to the broad and complex needs of post-*

*graduate students and gave me the skills I needed to effectively tackle the issues surrounding the involvement of postgrads in our students union*

— Cat Smith, Women's Officer,  
Lancaster University Students Union

### What's happening?

The programme is still being finalised but you can expect a variety of speakers on the different aspects of postgraduate education and supporting postgraduate students.

Workshops will explore issues and how to create campaigns and action to enhance the postgraduate experience.

Its also a great opportunity to meet other officers and colleagues to network and share ideas.

*The National Postgraduate Conference is a great opportunity for incoming Academic Affairs Sabbs to get to grips with the core grass root concerns of post-graduate students. Whether its part of induction or a refresher, your guaranteed to come away with enthusiasm and ideas to make effective representation for your post-grads*

— Peter Mason, Vice President (Academic Quality and Access), Birmingham University Guild of Students

### How to book

Further details on the programme and registration are available from the website, [www.npc.org.uk](http://www.npc.org.uk) or from the General Secretary, Simon Felton, at [npc@npc.org.uk](mailto:npc@npc.org.uk) or on 0121 251 2499

## NUS Conference

The end of March sees the annual NUS Conference at Blackpool and this year offered the exciting election for VP Welfare between two main candidates, Richard Angell and Ama Azowuru. As observers the NPC are concerned only with ensuring the NUS remembers postgraduate students. We were fortunate this year in getting a motion passed on Postgraduate Life rather than seeing it fall off the agenda due to time.

The motion noted unregulated postgraduate fees across the UK and the availability of bank loans and Career Development Loans which challenge those from lower socio-economic groups and the up-front nature of postgraduate programme costs. The motion proposed by Leicester, Reading, Liverpool, Liverpool John Moore and Teeside students' unions was passed and adds to existing NUS policy for the National Union of Students to work with NPC and in this case on the issue of unregulated fees.

The Welfare election was also closely linked to postgraduates with the main candidates having both worked with the NPC; Richard had worked on council tax issues and Ama on the issue of Bullying. The election was hard fought with Ama Azowuru winning and the NPC offer our congratulations to her and look forward to working with her on postgraduate welfare issues.

# Bullying and Postgraduates

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This article is kindly reproduced from the article that was written for the Bullying Booklet 'A guide to combating bullying for student officers'.

Bullying is often associated with compulsory education and the workplace but extends to both further and higher education and can be particularly prevalent at postgraduate level where it may often be more subtle. The National Postgraduate Committee recognises that wherever it occurs in the postgraduate student experience it is harmful to all involved – both the victim and perpetrator. Bullying can lead to self-doubt, lack of confidence, low self-esteem, depression and anxiety, self-harm and sometimes suicide.

Postgraduate students face not only bullying from their peer group but also from lecturers and supervisors and for those teaching – students that are taught. Bullying at a demanding academic level and environment and at a period when study is often self-directed can lead to serious affects on academic progression and personal achievement. The National Postgraduate Committee supports the National Union of Students' definition of Bullying as any action taken which makes another feel intimidated, excluded, or unsafe. We also believe that bullying has a hugely adverse effect on students' academic achievement and social, physical and mental wellbeing and all institutions should seek to support postgraduate students holistically by furthering harassment and bullying disciplinary procedures and by changing the culture and ethos of the postgraduate experience.

In the postgraduate student experience, bullying can take various forms and levels of transparency and often may not include students' peers. Different types of postgraduate experience, such as research or taught programmes, different disciplines and registration as either a home or international student can aggravate the experiences of bullying. Bullying behaviour can include:

- Constant criticism or trivialising of concerns and assessment;
- Deliberately excluding students;
- Teasing or belittling of student opinions or suggestions;
- Putting down students in front of other staff or a class.

Different postgraduate student experiences of bullying are highlighted below which highlight the subtlety and variation in experiences postgraduate students face:

Postgraduates who teach – Postgraduates who teach are doing a professional activity that will place demands on their own programme and will often require significant time for preparation. Postgraduates here can experience bullying from the students they teach with students being surly, aggressive or even

sexually harassing. The intimacy of such groups, in contrast to large lectures, can allow students to exhibit behaviour they would not risk in larger groups. Increasing numbers of mature students can also mean postgraduates may find themselves teaching people who are many years their senior in age or experience.

For many postgraduates admitting the problem exists is tantamount to admitting that they have failed... they legitimately feel that it harms their chances of being offered more teaching (Cutner and Brook, 1997, *High Noon in the Lecture Theatre*, THES).

The close relationship of postgraduates with staff can further aggravate the experiences of bullying and force students to not report bullying to ensure more teaching or less stigma in the department or university. Research students are particularly at risk from this in their relationship with their supervisor(s) – academic(s) that oversees and supervises their work.

The Student Supervision experience – A research students' experience of supervision is often a personal one that develops over time (usually 3 – 4 years) with an academic that can be compared to master and apprentice. Often this relationship can be prone to bullying through a supervisor's demands on a student or the students inability or inexperience to recognise such demands as bullying. For international students this can be particularly difficult as relationships with academics vary in style and behaviour. As students are not employed they can fall victim to capricious supervisors who believe a student is 'lucky to be there' and not regard excessive behaviour or demands as bullying.

*I did not want to raise the problems with my supervisor or department as it was so small for risk of being seen as a troublemaker and in this field of research it would damage my future career opportunities*

— John, PhD graduate

Postgraduate course experience – Some disciplines are prone to bullying due to the style of the postgraduate student experience. In disciplines such as science where lab based ac-

tivity and group research is more likely to take place postgraduates can face bullying from their peers. This bullying can often be subtle with use of facilities, sabotage, cliques and exclusion taking place without overt emphasis. Bullying can also be used to demean fellow postgraduates and to claim credit for research others have completed.

Dealing with bullying for postgraduate students can be challenging and there are various options open to postgraduate students facing bullying but most importantly responsibilities on universities to support postgraduate students.

For postgraduates who teach there are institutional guidelines and controls which can regulate behaviour and these can be used alongside departmental support. The experience of students however can often be to put up with bullying to ensure further teaching opportunities or to prevent being labelled a 'troublemaker' and jeopardising future career opportunities. Institutions must ensure therefore that staff and students are aware that discrimination includes taking any action such as bullying, harassment or discrimination against a student that makes a complaint and the potential personal and university liability of any such discrimination. The awareness of such stringent punishment for bullying would help create a culture in which postgraduate students could safely raise issues of concern.

For research students experiencing bullying through supervision, using institutional guidelines and complaints procedures is an option, but one that may raise the issue of being labelled a 'troublemaker'. In some circumstances postgraduates should seek departmental support or in joint supervision, the support of a second supervisor. This is not always possible and for some circumstances mediation or seeking student union or academic union support such as UCU support can help. Those moving onto research study should consider student-supervisor agreements as a guide to expectations and obligations as a tool to highlight what will be accepted by all parties and behaviour warranting complaints.

## Funding Advice

One of the most common questions postgraduate students and prospective postgraduate students ask about is funding their programmes. There are a number of resources available online to search for funding opportunities:

A new website is Postgraduate Studentships which claims to be the only website for postgraduates that brings together all the different types of Masters and Doctoral level funding:

<http://www.postgraduatestudentships.co.uk/>

Prospects Funding Guide is well established and offers a hard copy of the Prospects Postgraduate Funding Guide: <http://www.prospects.ac.uk/funding>

Education UK offers a comprehensive search facility for international students seeking a Scholarship by institution, charity and organisation: <http://www.educationuk.org/scholarships>

# What's the General Secretary been doing?

Much of the work of the General Secretary is invisible to students and student officers, meeting universities and organisations and attending meetings to ensure students views are represented. Recently the NPC's work has been very visible in a number of areas.

The NPC has continued to gain press coverage with an article in the Sunday Telegraph on Postgraduate Funding and articles in the THES about postgraduate issues. The NPC has also been a witness for a supervisor in an industrial tribunal. This was a very demanding position but one where the NPC's breadth of experience and advice could be harnessed to defend the rights of a supervisor accused of improper relations with their students. The case threatens to challenge the close working relationship between supervisor and student

and I was extremely pleased to be a witness to highlight existing and good practice in regard to supervision. The tribunal is ongoing but I hope to report a good outcome soon.

The NPC has also been working with the National Union of Students and Association of Managers in Student Unions (AMSU) to highlight the way the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) can work with the student movement and integrate and embed themes of quality and student learning in institutions and student bodies. Wes Streeting, VP Education and myself alongside other NUS staff attended the QAA Board Meeting in February to present these ideas and to discuss the QAA taking on a greater student led engagement. The presentation was received well and the QAA will be expanding its engagement, firstly with

the creation of a Development Officer position for liaison with students.

The final very publicly visible activity of the NPC was hosting the Eurodoc (a federation of associations of doctoral candidates and young researchers) Annual Conference in London in March. This attracted delegates from over 25 European countries and presentations from UK bodies and European organisations concerned with the development of the student experience. What was particularly exciting for students was a view shared by Mr Cornelis-Mario Vis from the European Commission DG Research on the European Charter and Code being more legally regarded and not voluntary. This is exciting for students as the Charter and Code offers guides to institutions on what they should be doing to support research.

## NPC Online Petition for student loans for postgraduates

The NPC has made use of the new online petitions at 10 Downing Street to reassert our policy for the student loans scheme to be extended to postgraduates not in receipt of financial assistance. The policy reflects that for PhD students, approx a third gain financial assistance from Research Councils but the majority, and the majority of Masters Students, are self funding. The financial worries of continuing onto postgraduate study can have a detrimental affect on students and the NPC believes the student loans scheme represents the best measure for supporting students.

The petition gathered 1951 responses and we would encourage you to support the campaign work from this petition to highlight the need for further funding support for postgraduate students in the UK.

## Postgraduate Council Tax NPC and NUS submission to DFES/DLGC

Following the joint meeting between NPC/ NUS and Bill Rammell MP this is a summary of the recommendations we presented to the Department for Education and Skills and Department for Local Government and Communities regarding postgraduate council tax.

### The Recommendations

The NPC and NUS are jointly calling for the Lyons Review and Government to provide national clarity by making those, yet to complete their:

- PhD, council tax exempt for a further two (or at the very least one) years after their normal three years of funding.
- Thesis or dissertation on a Masters teaching or research programme, council tax exempt for a further year after their normal one year.

This is because the biggest reason students give for the non-completion of their thesis or dissertation is financial pressures (Carney, 2002, Delayed Post Graduate Completion) and because if your PhD is not written up quickly, the chance it will be written up quickly the

chance it will be completed becomes very low. For PhD students the system is particularly unfair as a small proportion of students ever complete their research and submit within three years (full time).

- For students who have exemption certificates for two adjacent periods of study, i.e. 2005-6 and 2007-8 will be treated as continuous; any charge for time where the student is deemed to have not had exempt status is cleared even if the student has moved local authorities for the purpose of continuing study.

This is because the time that the charge is levied is most likely to be while the students is in receipt of a student loan or their postgraduate funding arrangement so finds the charge a significant burden. The earning potential for most students through this period is incredibly low so would most likely be eligible for Council Tax Benefit but this would add expensive procedure and administrative cost to the student, local authority and benefits agency. This loophole should be closed so public policy clearly encourages continuing study by not adding additional prohibitive charges to the cost of education.

### In Conclusion

The Lyons Review into Local Government Financing has triggered within the student movement and beyond the debate around full time students' council tax exemption. It looks like Lyons will not seek to change that but there are some irregularities, especially for postgraduates, that should be cleared up. Currently there is a "postcode lottery" between, and sometimes within, institutions about whether research and teaching postgraduate students writing up their thesis or dissertation are council tax exempt and that there are not charges for students for the small period of transition time in-between courses.

We hope this change meets the needs of our members and aids the government's ambitions for a highly skilled accredited workforce and a good return for the economy on the investment that is put into postgraduate education while reducing burdensome collection costs and spiralling students into more, potentially commercial, debt.

# Armineh Soorenian on her Research into Disability and International Students' Experiences

This article aims to briefly outline the general background to my research into disabled international students' different experiences in British Higher Education (HE). An assumption of the "normal" appears to underpin the construction and the provision of education within the traditional pedagogical system. Underlying selective structures, based on ability and class membership (Ball et al:2002), often created and perpetuated inequalities (Archer:2003). Entering any educational system has been traditionally based on the selection of the intellectually able/gifted or "elite", and the exclusion of those who were deemed to be educationally incompetent (Tomlinson:1982). Therefore, conventional systems were geared towards serving the needs of those students perceived to be "normal", with the assumption that such educational institutions as universities were not the place for disabled students (Riddell et al:2005).

However, data provided by the Higher Education Statistical Agency (HESA) and Skill: the National Bureau for Students with Disabilities shows that there has been a considerable increase in the number of disabled domestic students entering British HE between academic years 2001/02 and 2004/05. This increase can be partly attributed to the development of policies and provision for disabled students brought about by the Disability Discrimination Act (DDA) in 1995, and its addition of Part4 – the 'Special Educational Needs and Disability Act' (SENDA) in 2001.

The inclusive widening participation policies adopted by the Labour government to accommodate diversity within the student population, including non-traditional and under-represented groups, may also have contributed to the increased numbers of disabled domestic students at university (Brown & Simpson:2004; Tinklin et al:2002). It can also be argued that access to funds such as Disabled Students Allowance (DSA), Access Funds, Discretionary Awards and Social Security Benefits to help with impairment-related costs has made the transition of disabled domestic students from Further Education (FE) to mainstream HE somewhat smoother (Hurst:1999).

These examples suggest a positive move towards more inclusive educational practices, signifying progressive steps toward adopting the social interpretation of disability in education. The social model is a concerted shift away from an emphasis on an individual's impairment/s as the cause of disability, to the way in which physical, cultural and social environments exclude or disadvantage disabled people (Barnes:2001). The social model advocates the removal of barriers in society. In an educational context, this view recognises various social, environmental and teaching barriers as obstructing disabled students' progress

rather than seeing individual students' impairments as obstacles (Riddell et al:2005). Therefore, this model aims to accommodate all students rather than hold individual disabled students responsible for their failure to access education.

Despite this recent progress in disabled students' access to education, ample research has criticised HE institutions and related organisations for the limited access, support and funding options they offer to disabled students (Cottrell:1996; Parker:1999). Disabled domestic students who enter HE, despite its selective nature and inflexible culture (Burke:2005), often face various discriminatory social and environmental practices (Fuller et al:2004). This may be particularly the case for disabled international students, who may contend with possible additional cultural and linguistic barriers in British HE. Yet, very little is being written about this group.

However, the figures provided by HESA indicate that the percentage in increase of disabled international students entering British HE (38.24%) exceeds both disabled domestic students (37.02% increase) and non-disabled international students (31.38% increase). Despite the considerable increase in disabled international students accessing HE, there is no designated organisation responsible for their affairs. This means that there are no official services for representation, advice, policymaking and campaigning purposes. In the literature studied thus far, disabled international students' needs are often referred to Skill and the Council for International Education (UKCOSA); neither of which appear to be specifically concerned with provision for this group.

Consequently, disabled international students may feel invisible, and that their difficulties are either 'irrelevant' or 'added on as an optional extra' (Vernon 1999:391). They may feel discriminated against and rejected from such disabled domestic students' groups as Students with Disabilities (SWD) within the National Union of Students (NUS) and also from non-disabled international students' groups such as the Council of International students (CIS). This possible marginalisation could contradict Skill's statement, which claims that SENDA covers part-time, overseas, evening class, postgraduate, undergraduate, distance learning disabled students (DEMOS:2003).

Hence by employing a particular methodology and established data collection strategies, the study will identify and examine any difficulties and concerns that this group faces in academic and social life whilst in HE. Additionally, ways that these barriers can be removed will be suggested.

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## npc the national postgraduate committee

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*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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