npc the national postgraduate committee

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# Our Common Cause with International Postgraduate Students

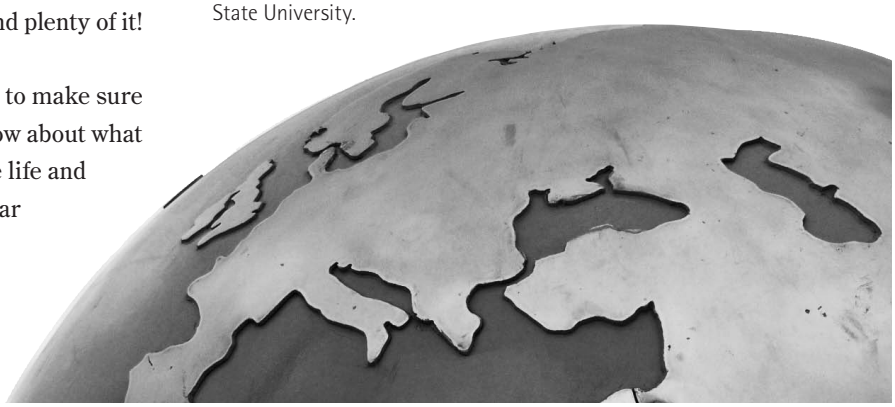
DON'T GET me wrong, but I never became involved with the National Postgraduate Committee because I wanted to be involved in student politics. Indeed, I did not become a postgraduate merely because I wanted to be, well, a postgraduate. Rather, through a background in the social sciences and an interest in both Economics and History I managed to achieve the marks to be lucky enough to receive funding from the ESRC that enabled me to undertake a PhD. I didn't choose to live a postgraduate lifestyle, rather it was the choice I made concerning my career that has made me follow one. Interestingly, when speaking to international students, I find that many have the same view and I realise that I share a lot of common ground with them

As I progressed along in the postgraduate life, I realised that there are many issues on campus that are more than relevant to our day-to-day needs. Certainly as one with a family life to pay for, I soon became aware of the lack of facilities provided by university student associations for postgraduates or international students; unions prefer to focus upon the 18 to 21 age range, this being the demographic of the majority. I also became aware of the burden, both in financial and workload terms that a postgraduate or international student has to face compared to their contemporaries, what I would give for a regular 8 hours work and then finish at five like the majority of my age group! It was thinking about such issues over two years ago that I came to the conclusion that postgraduate and international students require representation and plenty of it!

Which is where the NPC comes in. It is our role to make sure that student associations and policy makers know about what has a negative effect on day to day postgraduate life and what we would like changed about it and this year we have decided to have a special focus on the needs of postgraduate student from overseas. However, and please heed me well on this point, representation does not exist solely for its own sake nor the sake of the representatives themselves. Rather, if we at the NPC want to get the message across about conditions for postgraduate students in the United Kingdom, we have to realise it is they who are important and it is us that have to listen to them. For if we as an organisation fail to listen, then we fail to help who need us most.

Luckily, through the efforts of Simon Felton this has not been the case with the NPC for the last two years, and I as his successor intend to communicate on all levels with those who affect postgraduate life and vastly improve our reach and influence as an organisation, particularly for those of travel many thousands of miles to obtain the benefits of a British education. Nevertheless, I will conclude by stating that communication is a two way affair and as much as we have a duty at the NPC to inform our affiliates of what we do and why, we also have an obligation to listen as well. I'm not saying that this is not the case, far from it, but one of my first priorities as General Secretary will be to make sure that student unions, postgraduate or otherwise, will hear from the National Postgraduate Committee and in return, we will listen to their needs and help accordingly.

**About the author:** Duncan Philip Connors is currently General Secretary of the National Postgraduate Committee. Duncan is a PhD candidate in Economic History at the University of Glasgow. Prior to this, Duncan was an officer in the Royal Air Force for a period and in the 1990s taught in the United States at Pennsylvania State University.



# International Students – essential component to sustainability of Universities

As universities try to reduce their dependency on the Higher Education Funding Councils for their income, and the cap on tuition fees still in place, university Councils are increasingly looking to the international market, and the uncapped fees that international students bring with them. However with international fees usually closer to £10,000 per year and 49% of postgraduate income coming from non European students[1], what do international students get for their money.

Many international students come to the UK, expecting various services for the increased fee they pay, but on arrival discover that even some basic requirements have not been arranged for them. They arrive to find that they have to struggle with English as a second, or even third language, but still have to negotiate the red tape to sign leases, open bank accounts etc., all with little, if any assistance from their university.

Once they have managed to settle in, and start their chosen programme, they expect that their university will be offering them additional services for the additional fees, but find that they are expected to cope with any issues they have through the normal support mechanisms available to UK, ignoring the fact that as international students they have to deal with issues on visas, ability to work, cultural and language issues.

As universities attract more international students, they will need to grasp the opportunity to meet the challenges posed head on, and ensure that where they are not offering best value, they improve their services, and where required offer additional services created to meet the needs of their international students, to ensure that the credibility of their institution, and their degrees are not damaged.

If Universities get it right, they will be able to build on the £2.4 billion in Post graduate fees they got in 2004/2005, if they get it wrong their dependency on the Higher Education Funding Councils will increase, eroding their independence.

*1: Calculations based on the 2004/2005 Data from the Higher Education Statistics Agency.*

**About the author:** George Macfarlane is the Conference Officer of the NPC. He is currently the Student Elected Member of the Open University Council, and a member of the Open University Students Associations Executive Committee. George graduated from the OU with a Bachelor of Science in 1999, and is currently working towards a MSc in Computing for Commerce and Industry.

# Positive Engagement

Two months ago the National Postgraduate Committee gathered at Keele University for our annual conference. Once of the more topical sessions related to the decision taken by the University and Colleges Union (the UCU) in May. The Union voted to promote the idea of a boycott of Israeli universities and to fund a tour of Palestinian activists to union branches to debate implementing such a boycott. The NPC invited Dr Jon Pike, a lecturer at the Open University and founder of Engage (an organise who led the revolt against the AUT boycott in 2005) to address the conference. Later in the conference I was elected to the NPC executive with a mandate of following up on some of Jon's ideas for both opposing the boycott and promoting positive engagement between British, Israel and Palestinian student leaders and academics.

Since 2005 NPC has had a policy opposing an academic boycott of Israel. NPC sees such a boycott as an attack on academic freedom, and believes that it goes against both the interests of postgraduate students and the public interest. When the UCU first floated the idea of a boycott the then NPC General Secretary, Simon Felton, warned that "a boycott attempt based on nationality encourages discrimination and goes against the principle of judging academic work on its merits alone". The UCU on September 28th effectively backed this position and justified our concerns when they revealed that their own legal advice considered a boycott "unlawful" and that such a boycott would "run a serious risk of infringing discrimination legislation". It's not for nothing that governments, ministries, and universities regularly consult NPC on issues relating to postgraduate education.

Meantime as a moved towards a boycott were first planned, then cancelled, I've been contacting Israeli students in the UK to find out how the boycott debate was effecting them, and speaking with Israeli and Palestinian students planning on moving to the UK for their studies about their future.

Sarab Abu-Rabia-Queder, who completed a PhD on "Pioneer Bedouin women in Higher Education" in June 2006 and will soon begin work as a post doc at Oxford replied:

*"I think that as Palestinian woman living in Israel, it is not fair to include us in this boycott just because we have an Israeli citizenship."*

She added that:

*"in general… efforts should be focused on peace talk and communication and not other wise. There are many other ways to help the Palestinians inside and outside*

*…continued on page 4*

# International students with disabilities: What's "hard" times "hard" equal to?

This article discusses a number of general problems that disabled international students may encounter in their university lives referring to students' firsthand statements included in my Ph.D research. Almost all the barriers (including access and funding issues) for disabled domestic students may be particularly heightened for disabled international students, who may also contend with possible additional cultural and linguistic difficulties experienced by a number of their non-disabled international counterparts. Most international students experience a degree of culture-shock: how people live and work in other countries may challenge their own experiences. However, as Joseph suggests (below) for disabled international students, this is often exaggerated by additional factors such as the level and type of academic support required and provided; physical and informational accessibility, and different cultures of disability, which can significantly affect a successful study period.

*"The feeling that in England everything is more based on finances. All the help is available as long as you have the right funding. In my country not all the help is available, but the help you do get, has a more social inclusive character."*

For students who require high levels of support in their home country, additional financial and personal burdens associated with this support can make the transition particularly difficult. As Skill and UKCOSA (2006) suggest, these students may initially feel they must cope on their own without assistance, therefore choosing not to disclose the details of their impairments. Moreover, the identification of international students' impairments and related support needs may be difficult, due to language and cultural barriers. Cottrell (1996), for example, suggests that in diagnosing dyslexia, tests to assess non-native English speakers are not always available. Olivia's following response in the current research highlights the inaccessibility of the assessment procedure for students whose native language is not English:

*" … I didn't want to bother to explain … problems to the Disability Services staff in English (it was quite tiring to speak in English when I first arrived)."*

It must also be emphasised that there are no specific grants available for disabled international students, who are only allowed to remain in the UK on the condition that they make no recourse to public funds, including such welfare benefits as DSA. Despite these concerns, it appears that very little is being written about disabled international students' unique experiences, although figures provided by HESA indicate that between 2001/02 to 2004/05, the percentage increase in disabled international students entering British HE (38.24 per cent) exceeds both disabled domestic students (37.02 per cent) and non-disabled international students (31.38 per cent). Despite this 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, which emphasises the absolute necessity of carrying out research into disabled international students' experiences, with the view to create practical solutions. Tanji confirms this, when asked "how could your university experience improve?":

*"By creating a good support system, a circle so that international disabled students know where to go for advice and understand what rights they have. At the moment advice and help is too fragmented."*

Consequently, disabled international students may consider themselves as 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). Toney's statement reflects this:

*"social life is quite bad actually because if you are a disabled student it is always hard anyway but then if they see that you are an international disabled student, they even shy even a lot more thinking probably you are different."*

## Notes and bibliography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**About the author:** Armineh Soorenian is disabled international research student studying at University of Leeds, where she previously completed a MA in 'Disability Studies'. She also holds a degree in History of Art, Architecture and Design from Staffordshire University. Since August 2006 in her role as the Equal Opportunity Officer of the NPC she has been actively campaigning on issues such as the increase of 'Disabled Students Allowance' (DSA) for both full-time and part-time Home postgraduate students and availability of DSA for international postgraduate students.

*Israel. As an academic woman my self, I think we can use academia and science as a stage for mutual communication. Through the academia we can hear both sides and raise both sides' needs and plan ways for a solution and not for war."*

It is this work I hope to contribute to through my NPC project over the coming year.

The project is also a learning opportunity and a chance to focus on international students and international best practice. Asked why she chose the UK, Sarab explained she had both academic and personal reasons.

*"The UK is one of the leading places in academic development, and I found a perfect research center dealing with the theoretical themes I specialise in. It's a place where I can meet a variety of people, and when compared to the US, I think the UK and particularly Oxford have a more intimate environment for personal development."*

She added that "on a personal level, the UK is geographically close to our home, so we can flight back and forth with our young children easily." The needs of students, particularly at postgraduate level are likely both to be different and to be met differently by UK, Israeli and Palestinian universities. In the coming months I'll begin to examining this, and plans are in the works for some international dialogue and sharing of practice on student provisions.

In the mean time, if any reads have ideas for positive engagement, please do be in touch through the NPC.

**About the author:** Andre Oboler is currently holding a Project Officer position with a specific remit of improving relations between British, Israeli and Palestinian students and academics in the context of UCU discussions of the academic boycott of Israeli universities. Andre is a PhD candidate in Lancaster University. For the past five years he has been actively involved in both the NPC and the Lancaster University's Graduate Student Association.

# DOCTOR FUN

Trouble all around

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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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