

## **"Left Behind?": Student Activities for Postgraduates**

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June 2005

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## **Foreword**

This document represents the outcome of a project I offered to undertake on behalf of the National Postgraduate Committee following my election to its executive in August 2005. It is dedicated to all postgraduate students across the UK, in the hope that its findings may go some way to improving their chances of having a good, varied and enjoyable time outwith their studies. My heartfelt thanks are offered to those who took the time to complete its central survey, and also to all of my friends and colleagues on the National Postgraduate Committee for their advice, support and encouragement.

David Bean, St Andrews, June 2006

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## Introduction

In recent years, spurred on by the introduction of tuition fees for undergraduates, much emphasis has been placed throughout the UK on the "experience" of students at university. Students are increasingly viewing themselves as "consumers", and expect from the institutions at which they study not only a high standard of academic teaching, but also a diverse range of opportunities to enjoy themselves on a social level. Traditionally in the UK (unlike, for instance, in the USA) such activities have tended to be led by students, under the auspices of a "Students' Union" (sometimes known as an "Association" or "Guild"), a semi-autonomous organisation run in collaboration between full-time members of staff, full-time students on sabbatical and part-time student officers. In general, this arrangement would appear to be the best alternative. With the support of staff members whose length of tenure allows the benefit of experience when dealing with commercial matters, student officers, taking charge of the strategic direction of the organisations and the running of events, can be responsive to the needs and demands of their student members as they change with the passage of time.

Where this arrangement begins to show weakness, however, is in its ability (or otherwise) to cater to specific groups within student bodies, whose needs may differ from those of the group to which the typical student officer belongs; the most notable example of this phenomenon is postgraduate students. Compared to undergraduates, postgraduates face a number of issues that affect the kind of activities they are likely to seek involvement with. Most obviously, they are older, and educated to a significantly higher standard (and have a significantly larger international and part time contingent). They are likely to be more focussed on their academic work, and in many cases of a more serious character (as well as having higher expectations). In comparison to an exuberant eighteen-year-old recently escaped from the parental nest, it is clear that their interests, priorities and preferences are likely to be very different.

This difference does not mean that it is impossible for their needs to be provided for within universities in general and the student union movement in particular, nor that the extra effort required to make such provision should not be attempted. As democratic organisations, students' unions have a duty to provide for all of their members, if not equally, at least to the best of their abilities; postgraduate students are invariably as full a set of members of their unions as are undergraduates. Most unions would accept this argument in principle, but object that they have neither the time nor resources to gauge the needs of their postgraduate populations and develop programmes in response. For this reason, the National Postgraduate Committee has undertaken to investigate the issue on a national level. With the investigation now complete, this report will present its key findings by establishing the extent to which postgraduates are being included in current activities provisions, and offering recommendations as to how any union, regardless of its current provision and the availability of resources, might easily make improvements. In doing so, it will confront a number of issues of variably obvious importance, ranging from the role of the union, to the issue of integration versus segregation with undergraduates, to provisions during the summer undergraduate holiday.

Whilst it is not the intention of this report to argue that postgraduates' social lives (or those of anyone else) should be excessively structured, or that *ad hoc* social activities between friends are somehow inferior to events run by students' unions, it nonetheless seems clear that an institution whose postgraduates become and remain engaged in a wide programme of activities is likely to be providing a more positive experience for its students than one where, for instance, no such activities are available. This report therefore makes no apology for presupposing that the sustained engagement of postgraduates in student activities is an intrinsic good and thus, for the sake of clarity, shall define an institution as 'successful' where this is the case and — though no names are mentioned — as 'unsuccessful' where the reverse is true. Readers are reminded that all value judgments alluded to by the report are strictly limited in scope to the issues under consideration.

## Research methodology

The primary mechanism of the research was a survey sent to representatives of all UK higher educational institutions offering postgraduate-level qualifications. These were addressed to these institutions' Students' Unions/Associations/Guilds, in particular to (almost exclusively part-time) postgraduate student officers or, where this was impossible, to sabbaticals whose remits covered student activities. Postgraduate students were preferred because it was considered that they would be in a better position to speak of the true experiences of postgraduates, and less likely to exaggerate their institution's performance for reasons of prestige. Some institutions, meanwhile, forwarded their surveys to permanent staff members who happened to be more involved in events organisation.

In total, twelve institutions returned completed surveys. Whilst this relatively low response rate might seem disappointing, it is fortunate that those who responded offered a broad range of perspectives, from two institutions reporting little or no attempt to cater to postgraduates, to several operating independent unions specifically for postgraduates. Numerous points in the spectrum between these two extremes were also in evidence.

The survey consisted of the following questions, designed to cover as full a range as possible of issues relating to the subject:

1. What kinds of activities do you/does your institution run/facilitate that are aimed specifically at postgraduates?
2. How often are these activities held?
3. How popular are they — how many postgraduates generally come along?
4. Who handles the bulk of the organisational work?

5. In the summer (during the undergraduate holiday), do you find that there are generally more/fewer/about the same number of events?
6. Do you include, or aim to include, mature undergraduate students in postgraduate events?
7. In general, do you find that postgraduates tend to involve themselves in other, primarily undergraduate-led activities?
8. Are there any activities that seem particularly suited to the furtherance of postgraduate/undergraduate integration?
9. How do you find most postgraduates spend their majority of their social time?
10. To what extent does your Students' Association/Union/Guild assist with the provision of student activities for postgraduates?
11. What could it do to assist this further that it is not doing already?
12. Can you think of any other relevant information not addressed directly by these questions?

Responses to the questionnaire, which was initially sent out at the end of January 2006, arrived over a period of two months; anonymity was promised to all recipients, and as such the only institution the author is in a position to comment on specifically is his own, the University of St Andrews. The responses were collated and tabulated, in order to allow the deduction of the general trends this report was designed to highlight and, correspondingly, the identification of best practice and recommendations of any practical steps that might be taken by institutions seeking ways to improve their provision for postgraduates.

## Models of provision

Before turning to the trends identified in the responses to the survey, it is useful firstly to consider the mechanisms through which postgraduate student activities are provided in universities across the UK. In an article written for the *Journal of Graduate Education*, Martin Gough identified three basic models of provision<sup>1</sup>, listed here in increasing order of complexity:

- The society, characterised by voluntary membership and organisation along the same lines as other (most likely undergraduate-led) student societies. Usually these societies are funded primarily through their affiliation to the parent students' union at the university, but in certain cases they may be independent; they are run by committees, usually consisting largely of postgraduates, who may be aware of the concerns of their constituents but do not necessarily possess the resources or time to meet them in full.
- The standing committee, a larger body forming part of the union but of a higher status than most societies (possibly accompanied by greater funding provision), and often offering automatic, free membership to all postgraduate students at the institution. Gough's research presupposes that the emphasis of such a body would be on providing representational services to students, but several universities, including St Andrews, employ a standing committee-style model focussed almost exclusively on activities — indeed the St Andrews group calls itself the 'Postgraduate Society' in spite of its universal membership clause.
- The postgraduate students' union, an organisation operating autonomously from (although hopefully operating in co-operation with) the union to which undergraduates belong. Essentially a separate body, a postgraduate union offers the sharpest focus on postgraduate concerns, but requires the greatest amount of extra resources (including accommodation and staff) to run, leaving it open only to the largest institutions and/or those most heavily populated with postgraduates. In some cases postgraduates belong both to the

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<sup>1</sup> Gough, M., "Postgraduate Student Associations: an analytic, a synthetic, or an *a posteriori* ontology?", *Journal of Graduate Education* 3:3 (2004)

postgraduate union and to the undergraduate union, rendering the postgraduate union an additional privilege reserved for those students, whereas in others the relationship is exclusive, where postgraduates only belong to the postgraduate union.

Throughout this report, the structures that exist in each university to provide for postgraduate student activities, whichever model is followed, will be referred to by means of the shorthand expression "postgraduate bodies".

Whilst the activities themselves, in each of these cases, are managed through committee structures involving the delegation of duties to specific officers, postgraduate unions were unsurprisingly the most likely to enjoy support from permanent members of (union) staff, although one institution with a standing committee reported the same. In addition, one respondent reported substantial involvement and enthusiasm from the university's graduate school, whereas another stated that the willingness of academic staff to become involved varied widely from department to department — perhaps understandably, since not every department would necessarily be aware of what it could be doing for its students. If there is a role for universities to play in their students' social activities, this is likely to vary considerably from institution to institution owing to local factors such as funding, and would require initiative from students in approaching the departments directly with proposals. Great variances were also reported in the level of involvement of the students' unions proper, but both of these matters shall be considered in detail separately.

On the 'demand' side of the equation, it is not surprising that larger, better-resourced organisations such as postgraduate unions and the best supported standing committees proved most successful in attracting students to their events. This report shall, however, stop short of offering a manifesto for the creation of such organisations. Other NPC documents have already made this case in detail, whereas the ability of any single institution to form a postgraduate union (or provide resources to a society or standing committee) is dependent almost entirely upon local issues. In

any event, the focus of this report is on offering realistic strategies for any institution to improve, regardless of its size or wealth.

It is worth noting that three of the institutions surveyed reported no discernable attempt to cater to the social needs of postgraduates within any kind of model, thus creating an entirely unstructured social scene. Bearing in mind the earlier observation that this report stands explicitly in favour of sustained engagement by postgraduates in student activities, one can only conclude that institutions lacking such support should be encouraged to aim higher, and the National Postgraduate Committee should be prepared to offer its assistance however it can to institutions in this position that are seeking to do so.

## Trends

Before examining the ways that student officers and groups have in the past gone about trying to engage postgraduates in social activities, it is worth beginning by considering what these students reportedly spend their time doing when not engaged in a structured activity, or working — that is, how they would be spending their time were no student activities available whatsoever. Responses to question 9 have revealed one of the classic problems faced by those seeking to organise postgraduate activities: many live outside the university campus area, and still more have families of their own, making participation difficult for reasons of distance and alternative calls on their time. There may be scope for certain institutions particularly challenged by these issues to respond by marketing social events as an opportunity for postgraduates to experience a change of scene and widen their social networks, but there again postgraduates generally tend to be old and independent enough to provide for any desires they may feel in these areas by themselves. Nonetheless, several institutions reported that their postgraduates tended to spend time in *ad hoc* social groups they had formed by themselves (i.e. groups not related to a particular kind of activity), and one respondent reported success in reaching out to several of the institution's larger social groups, persuading their members to begin attending events *en masse*. This is a useful suggestion, and one that could easily be adopted elsewhere; strategically, anyone wishing to emulate this experience would do best to identify certain key, socially well-situated postgraduates, inviting them personally to attend events and allowing word of mouth to take over thereafter. Meanwhile, another respondent whose institution provided one of the more varied selections of events stated that this variety allowed them to appeal to a larger number of interests and social groups — for instance, that those who would not enjoy the more inebriating events might just as well appreciate their programme of day trips.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, variety was one of the defining characteristics at the more successful institutions. More encouraging was the revelation that none of the most popular events cited by respondents appeared to be especially difficult to organise. Whilst high-profile, more intermittent events (such as the termly party run at one

institution) attract larger numbers of people, it appears to be the smaller events that offer the greatest prospect of encouraging long-term engagement by postgraduates in the organising body. As reported, such events generally did not revolve around the consumption of alcohol, but instead focussed on adding a communal element to activities postgraduates might otherwise be happy to pursue on their own. A book club at one institution proved surprisingly popular; one might also imagine that a series of film nights, run under a postgraduate banner, might have a similar effect. Pub quizzes were also popular, and provide the added advantage of facilitating, without requiring, alcohol consumption. Day trips, particularly when offered free of charge (as in the case of one Scottish institution running trips to the Edinburgh Festival), were always popular. In summary, none of these events would require a great deal of organisation on their own, and, were it possible to delegate duties to a multi-member committee, a full programme of such events could be established without overburdening officers, or even requiring great expense.

It was felt to be particularly important to examine the special situation faced by those postgraduates on longer-term courses who continue their studies through the summer. During this period, undergraduates are away, universities quieten and, in most cases, the opportunities for social interaction lessen, offering particular opportunities for postgraduate bodies to make up the shortfall. Indeed, some would argue that it is incumbent on these groups to be as active as possible during the summer for this very reason. Accordingly, only one institution reported ceasing its postgraduate-focused activities during the summer, whereas most continued their programme of events in the same fashion as across the rest of the year. Most reported that numbers fell slightly, perhaps because of the absence of those postgraduates whose timetables more closely mirrored those of undergraduates (such as students in taught Masters programmes following the undergraduate session dates), but by no means enough to make them consider scrapping the programmes for the duration. One body actually reported an increase in its participation during the summer, but this was because its students' union, considered to be generally insensitive to the needs of postgraduates, shuts down during the break completely. It would appear, therefore, that for an institution enjoying an average-to-good rate of postgraduate

activity outside summer, the best approach would simply be to carry on with the regularly-scheduled programme (with appropriate seasonal adjustments). Organisations struggling to improve involvement, meanwhile, might do well to exploit their virtual monopoly over organised social activities through the period, by attracting new members or participants and hopefully promoting sustained involvement across the rest of the year.

One final issue worthy of note is that some of the most successful bodies surveyed were those that ran dedicated orientation programmes for postgraduates. It is difficult to discern the extent to which these programmes contributed to the institutions' success, since those with the capacity to organise such a programme already tended to be larger in size and better resourced than the average (and such organisations tended to be more successful in any case, as noted in the previous chapter). As these organisations also reported a tendency for involvement to tail away by about October, this report cannot recommend the establishment of such a programme to all institutions as a measure likely to bring proportionate returns to the effort and expense required, particularly since most universities offer more than one entry date for postgraduates, creating no direct equivalent to the traditional undergraduate "freshers' week". There may, of course, be other good reasons for running an orientation programme, such as welfare concerns; such issues lie beyond the scope of this report, but have been touched upon already in research conducted on behalf of the NPC by Tim Brown<sup>2</sup>. Nonetheless, it is standard practice for student societies to run introductory events upon the arrival of new students to attempt to capture their attention, and in this respect postgraduate bodies are no different. In particular, they often prove invaluable to the recruitment of new committee members.

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<sup>2</sup> Brown, T., "Providing for the Postgraduate Market: Extracts", *Journal of Graduate Education* 3:3 (2004)

## The role of the union

One of the principal objectives of this project was to identify the role that students' unions are, could or perhaps should be playing in the provision of student activities for postgraduates. This issue is particularly relevant in institutions operating independent postgraduate unions. Of the four in this category that responded, all of whom operate a 'joint membership' policy (where postgraduates belong to both unions), three stated that the university-wide union promoted events jointly with the postgraduate union, whereas the fourth reported that the union essentially ignored postgraduates, and the postgraduate union was attempting to gain complete control over all postgraduate affairs. Whilst it is difficult to extrapolate from this data any kind of wider trend, owing to the small sample size, it is nonetheless encouraging that the majority of the unions in this position were behaving fairly towards their postgraduates: they appeared to recognise the additional expertise of the postgraduate union, and show willingness to work in co-operation instead of either ignoring it and running rival events or ignoring postgraduate students completely. One noted that its union encouraged the development of postgraduate-focussed student societies, another welcome measure. These seem to be the best courses of action that a predominantly undergraduate-focussed union in this kind of situation could take, and should be commended to all sabbaticals of unions with a postgraduate counterpart; it also has the virtue of requiring very little effort on their part.

Where no independent union exists, it becomes even more important for a union to provide support (and in most cases funding) to its postgraduate social structure, but in this area the survey uncovered a rather less positive story. Four respondents expressed dissatisfaction with their union's performance; of these, two stated that the union provided little or no support to their societies, one stated that its union-affiliated postgraduate society did not appear to function and the fourth had a standing committee-style group operating independently from the union. Of the remaining three that gave constructive responses, one stated that a postgraduate society was in development but not already existent, one that a postgraduate society had been established recently but was so new as to make comment on its performance

impossible, and one, most positively, indicated that the union ran its standing committee to general satisfaction — this would appear to be the best result in the absence of a postgraduate union, and is also the case at St Andrews.

The upshot of these results shall be considered shortly, but the other area where the role of the union becomes especially important is in the assistance they might provide for the running of events during the summer. Postgraduates often have limited amounts of time in which to organise events, whereas sabbatical officers and members of staff commonly have more time available to them during the summer than during undergraduate term time. This presents an ideal opportunity for sabbaticals and staff to assist in the setting up and promotion of such events, but no institution reported any outstanding examples of sabbatical leadership in respect to either the summer or any other kind of activity during the year, indicating a need for sabbaticals to take some extra degree of initiative.

Responses to the question of how unions could improve their service to postgraduates were varied. Three institutions displayed outright hostility to the idea of further union involvement, presumably because of negative past experiences; one of these stated that such involvement would not be unwelcome in principle, but a prerequisite would be for the union essentially to wake up and realise that postgraduate students exist and have needs not currently being met. One suggested a focus on cultural events; one of the London University colleges suggested the organisation of events in co-operation with other universities; two asked for greater effort in promoting events, particularly during Freshers' Week, to postgraduates, and one of these also requested greater representation of postgraduates in union administration across the board; one requested a central information source for postgraduates based in the union; one felt that the union should be communicating more effectively with the university's graduate school.

On the whole, it is hard to describe this picture other than as unsatisfying, and in need of improvement. Yet improvements would not, in most cases, be difficult to implement. As a first step unions must commit to the principle of improving their

record on postgraduate activities; this would make an ideal policy for a sabbatical candidate's election campaign, as even undergraduates can be brought to believe that the inclusion of postgraduates is an issue they should care about. From there, unions could examine the provision that exists for postgraduates already, and in addition to any further improvements necessitated by local circumstances, could seek to augment this provision by:

- Actively pursuing the affiliation of any independent postgraduate-serving groups or societies, to create an officially-recognised postgraduate body capable of reaching beyond the pre-existing social boundaries of the union into the wider community
- Providing such groups with additional (and possibly preferential) funding, working towards reflecting the proportion of students at the institution who are postgraduates
- Promoting societies to subcommittee status, making membership automatic and free for all postgraduates, and involving their leadership in the union's executive committee (or equivalent); the objective here is not to force all committee members to become unnecessarily involved in union activities that might not necessarily be relevant to their remit, and indeed this should be scrupulously avoided, but rather to provide a mechanism for postgraduate voices to be heard throughout the union hierarchy, to allow concerns such as those found by the survey to be addressed
- Offering dedicated sabbatical support by adding a requirement to assist with postgraduate events planning, particularly during the summer, to the remit of a relevant sabbatical; also offering administrative support
- Promoting other relevant events directly to postgraduates
- Cultivating contacts in the university's graduate school, college or equivalent (perhaps by adding liaison duties to the remit of a relevant sabbatical)
- Pursue active postgraduate students with a view to having them play an active role in the running of the union, most likely by standing for elected positions.

These relatively simple steps might not appear particularly radical on paper, but they do have the potential to make real differences to the status of postgraduate students across the country, and as such should be recommended for implementation wherever possible.

## Postgraduate/undergraduate integration

One recurrent issue whenever the matter of postgraduate activities is discussed is the extent to which postgraduates are able and willing to interact with undergraduates, participating in the same activities and thereby getting to know one another. Such interaction is often viewed as an important end, but rather than blithely accepting this view it is worthwhile to examine whether it is indeed desirable. As with many of the issues brought up in this report, the answer is largely dependent upon local and personal circumstances. A small university, for instance, is likely to entertain a closer-knit social scene in a number of different ways; as there are fewer students, a natural desire for diversity in one's social contacts makes students more likely to want to bridge the divide.

But why should there be a divide in the first instance? For a number of good reasons. As noted in the introduction, the fundamental interests of postgraduates and undergraduates are likely to be different, owing to the gulf in age, experience and academic achievement to date between the two groups. Postgraduates have already experienced many of the classic features of undergraduate student life, such as insobriquetous parties and their first forays into romance; they are therefore more likely to want to diversify their experiences, and having chosen to continue with their studies they are also likely to be more studious and thus less engaged by hedonistic activities. Some postgraduates who also have jobs tutoring or acting as wardens in halls of residence may feel uncomfortable interacting with their "charges" on a social level, and still more may be preoccupied with families of their own.

But the fact that interaction with undergraduates may not be right for all postgraduates does not mean that the opportunities to allow them to do so should be limited; anecdotal evidence suggests that many postgraduates have a large number of friends within the undergraduate student body, and since having friends is undeniably a good thing it becomes worthwhile to attempt to encourage interaction so far as possible. Moreover, within their academic careers postgraduates may be seen as undertaking a journey between their intellectual state at the end of their

undergraduate studies, and their state later on when they may possibly become members of staff. It is important that their social arrangements offer the possibility of mirroring that growth, allowing them to move as freely as possible between varying social environments, and their accompanying levels of maturity. The most important objective should be to avoid a situation where postgraduates feel excluded from undergraduate-led activities, and most institutions reported that feelings of exclusion were not a particularly grave problem. In St Andrews, for instance, whilst postgraduates are not represented proportionately across the gamut of societies for the reasons hitherto discussed, there are at least several societies with postgraduates on their committees. Respondents to the survey reported that interaction was most common in sporting, cultural and academically-related activities, which tallies well with the theories here noted, and promoting these kinds of activities directly to postgraduates was the most successful method most respondents could think of to further the cause of interaction. Society events are, of course, generally organised and promoted by semi-autonomous groups of students, making it difficult for the union officers to adopt a policy of encouraging postgraduate involvement in societies, but nonetheless there are some practical steps that could be taken:

- Unions could generally encourage their societies to create promotional materials for relevant events targeted directly at postgraduates
- Postgraduate bodies could offer grants to societies to defray their expenses for such publicity
- More ambitiously, these bodies could offer to societies the opportunity to notify them of upcoming events that may be of relevance to postgraduates, which they themselves could then publicise through newsletters, emails and even by designing and distributing additional postgraduate-focused publicity on their behalf
- Extra emphasis could be placed on running joint events between postgraduate bodies and other societies.

Another interesting result is that there did not appear to be an inverse correlation between the provision of postgraduate-focused activities and the willingness of

postgraduates to become involved in undergraduate-led activities. This is strange because it would seem, intuitively, that the fewer opportunities there were for postgraduates to participate in activities directed at themselves, the more likely they would be to become involved in other (i.e. non-postgraduate-focussed) activities, but the evidence showed that this was not the case across the board. What this indicates is that postgraduates whose institutions perform poorly at encouraging their participation may well have given up on student activities entirely, a most unsatisfactory outcome. This presents even greater reason for institutions to ensure that some level of provision is made.

That aside, one sector of the undergraduate student body that would appear particularly well-suited to social interaction with postgraduates is the cohort of mature students, whose life experience may allow them to relate more readily to postgraduates than to undergraduates who entered directly from school. It is of course always difficult to provide activities focussed on mature students — observations about family and other commitments apply to an even greater extent than to postgraduates — so to foster a welcoming environment for those mature students who may yet be interested within postgraduate bodies represents an efficient use of resources, and may help to swell membership and participation. Most respondents, encouragingly, stated that they were happy to welcome mature students to most or all of their activities, but few had considered the possibility of targeting them directly. One noted, insightfully, that mature students were always especially welcome because the "mature vibe" they helped foster was exactly what they were setting out to achieve, and other institution could easily reap similar benefits through a little extra promotional effort. All other things being equal, it is worth formally recommending to all postgraduate bodies that they make every attempt to involve mature students in their activities.

Each of these measures depends, of course, to a greater or lesser extent on the availability of resources to the postgraduate bodies, but it is also worth mentioning that in practice the usual way for any group within a union (or, in the case of postgraduate unions, connected to a university) to receive additional funds is by

making a case that the funds would be used in a beneficial manner, and it is entirely possible that the bodies could use these findings to assist them in doing so.

## **Additional observations**

This report has deliberately avoided the question of whether it is desirable or practical for universities and/or unions to provide dedicated social space for the exclusive use of postgraduates. Only one respondent to the survey volunteered the information that such a space existed within their institution; its popularity was high, and it served as a useful focal point for postgraduate activities. However, for a full treatment of this matter readers are directed to the referenced article in the *Journal of Graduate Education* (volume 3, issue 3) by Tim Brown, who has investigated and reported on the subject in detail. As this report is focussed on providing simpler, more easily implementable measures that could potentially be taken by any institution, it shall be left to him and other more authoritative sources to pronounce upon.

It is worth considering briefly what role universities have to play in student activities for postgraduates. This is a tricky subject, as few universities are likely to have prioritised them, and most would consider them to be firmly within the remit of the students' (or postgraduate) union. The provision of resources by universities to their unions is a common bone of contention, and satisfaction is rare, but it is desirable for universities to take a direct interest in the matter of whether or not postgraduates are being serviced adequately. On another note, as one respondent remarked, universities' central administrations have the power to assist or impede postgraduate bodies by granting or denying access to email lists consisting of all postgraduate students and, data protection issues accepted, all universities should be encouraged to ensure that such access is available.

As was noted in "Models of Provision", one respondent observed that there was a wide disparity between the level of interest individual departments displayed towards postgraduate activities: some supported their students' efforts wholeheartedly, whilst others appeared thoroughly disinterested. Again, it would be up to students to approach their departments with specific proposals for involvement, as academic departments cannot necessarily be expected to offer such support on their own initiative (principally because they may not be aware of any desire on the part of

postgraduates for assistance); because of the closer relationship between postgraduates and their departments than undergraduates commonly enjoy, this would not be difficult to arrange. It is worth noting that some departments may have existing relationships with undergraduate-led academic societies focussed on their subject area but, again, academic societies are one of the most fruitful areas for postgraduates and undergraduates to come together, so this may work to everyone's benefit.

Meanwhile, there may be a role for the National Postgraduate Committee to play in augmenting the recommendations contained in this report. The following suggestions stand out:

- Most obviously, the NPC could make this report available to students' unions, commending it to them and recommending the implementation of its findings, preferably without regard to whether or not they are affiliated
- It could also, more generally, encourage (perhaps first discussing strategies for encouraging) unions to pay attention to the social lives of their postgraduates
- Approaching universities directly to ask them to make it clear to their unions that the funding provided to them is designed for the benefit of all students including postgraduates, and to have them provide evidence that the needs of postgraduates are not being ignored
- Establishing what the legal position is regarding universities providing to postgraduate bodies email lists consisting of addresses for all postgraduate (possibly including mature undergraduate) students, or at least the facility to contact all such students by submitting emails to the university, and then forming a coherent policy on the matter and arming postgraduate bodies with the resulting information.

The author's own concern about postgraduate student activities is this: the real problem faced by the bodies established to support them is that whilst postgraduates might care about some of the individual activities run, they rarely display a comparable level of concern for, and interest in, the groups themselves.

This is because the only thing uniting the members of such a body is their status as postgraduate students, which is a far less tangible link than that which exists between members of a society focussed upon some common interest. The challenge to the postgraduate bodies therefore becomes that of fostering a real sense of society within their membership. It is hoped that some of the recommendations made by this report could sufficiently advance the social scene as to provide a foundation for this kind of feeling to be built upon, but it will nevertheless remain difficult. Only by encouraging members to treat the body as an end in itself, rather than simply a means for providing them with a set of diverting events, can committees guarantee that their efforts will be sustainable in the long term, with new generations of students coming forward to continue and expand upon their work.

## Conclusion and recommendations

It is hoped that this report, and the research that founded it, will be of genuine value to students' unions and postgraduate bodies across the country. It has already dealt with each of the issues the author considers particularly important in turn, and so this conclusion shall take the form of an executive summary of the recommendations advanced, under the following five key headings pertaining to each of the parties involved.

In general:

- All institutions should incorporate some form of body providing student activities for postgraduates.

Students' unions should:

- Commit to the principle of postgraduate involvement in student activities
- In the case of institutions not currently possessing a functioning postgraduate body of this kind, aim to establish (or, if applicable, re-establish) one as a matter of priority
- Provide postgraduate bodies with adequate resources and appropriate sabbatical and/or staff support, demonstrating initiative and leadership
- Where possible, promote flourishing postgraduate societies to standing committee status, involving their leadership in the running of the union, granting additional resources and allowing universal free membership to be extended to all postgraduate students
- Support and encourage the creation of other postgraduate-focussed societies (based on common interests, subject areas, etc.), and encourage involvement by postgraduates in undergraduate-led societies, tackling any latent feelings of exclusion
- Promote their own events to postgraduates
- Establish and maintain links with the university's graduate school, authorising a named liaison officer if necessary

- Actively seek out postgraduate representation on union committees, and mind their concerns.

Postgraduate bodies should:

- Run as wide a variety of events as possible, especially during the summer, such that not all of the events revolve around the consumption of intoxicating liquor
- Run introductory events for new postgraduates at appropriate entry points
- Identify and target well-connected postgraduates to expand attendance at events
- Aim to include mature students wherever possible, including extending membership privileges and promoting events directly to the cohort
- Encourage undergraduate-led societies to promote relevant events to postgraduates specifically, offering funds and support for the creation of suitable advertising materials
- Run joint events with undergraduate-led societies
- Aim to foster a sense of society within their membership.

Universities should:

- Pay attention to the provision of services by their students' union to postgraduates
- Request and assess evidence that such provision is being made
- Encourage individual departments to be receptive to approaches from postgraduate bodies seeking their support
- Ensure that postgraduate bodies have a viable means of communicating with all postgraduates via email.

The NPC should:

- Publish and distribute this document
- Encourage the implementation of its findings by all relevant parties
- In particular, establish, and campaign for the implementation of, policy relating to access rights to email lists of postgraduates.

## **Bibliography**

Gough, M., "Postgraduate Student Associations: an analytic, a synthetic, or an a posteriori ontology?", *Journal of Graduate Education* 3:3 (2004)

Brown, T., "Providing for the Postgraduate Market: Extracts", *Journal of Graduate Education* 3:3 (2004)

**All other research was original.**

## Appendix: Initial project proposal

The following is the proposal for this project tabled by the author at the Ordinary General Meeting held at the University of Essex (Colchester) in November 2005.

I was elected to the position of Project Officer offering to undertake a research project concerning the involvement of postgraduates in student activities, a subject that fits closely with my remit as Director of Student Development and Activities at the University of St Andrews. I have undertaken preliminary research into the matter, and now present this formal proposal for the consideration of the Committee.

Officers in the NPC have already undertaken a certain degree of research into the role of students' associations in providing for the needs of postgraduates. In the *Journal of Graduate Education* 3:3 (2004), Martin Gough ("Postgraduate Student Associations: an analytic, a synthetic, or an a posteriori ontology?") argues that there are three basic models of postgraduate involvement:

- An affiliated society of, and for, postgraduates, funded on the same basis as other societies and with optional (most likely paid) membership
- A Standing Committee, of which all postgraduates in an institution automatically become members, and usually receiving greater levels of funding
- An autonomous Postgraduate Association/Union, with limited or no connection to its undergraduate equivalent.

By defining the 'options', as it were, available to postgraduates wishing to organise themselves, Gough's article is therefore very useful indeed. However, the emphasis of the article is upon assessing the strengths and weaknesses of these models as pertains to representation, and though it touches upon activities, the coverage of this issue is limited. Meanwhile, in the same issue, Tim Brown's article ("Providing for the Postgraduate Market") uses a survey to make recommendations as to the issues that should be confronted by institutions and associations in order to further postgraduate

life most effectively, but again the emphasis is on representation, and there is little linkage with the discussion regarding the three models Gough defined. The same applies to the information on the NPC's web site.

I therefore propose to undertake a new survey, which would not be complicated or seek to duplicate the valuable work undertaken by Gough and Brown, but would concentrate on investigating how well postgraduates can be provided for in the field of student activities, under each of Gough's three models. Identifying the relevant associations is simple — the NPC's web site has links — and I shall contact the postgraduate officer(s) in each institution about which details are available, to ask for a response to some variant on the following questions:

- What kinds of activities do you run/facilitate that are specifically for postgraduates?
- How often are these activities held?
- How popular are they — how many postgraduates generally come along?
- Who handles the bulk of the organisational work?
- In the summer (during the undergraduate holiday), do you find that there are generally more/fewer/about the same number of events?
- Do you include mature undergraduate students in these events?
- In general, do you find that postgraduates tend to involve themselves in other, primarily undergraduate-led activities?
- Are there any activities that seem particularly suited to the furtherance of postgraduate/undergraduate integration?
- How do you find most postgraduates spend their majority of their social time?
- To what extent does your Students' Association/Union/Guild assist with the provision of student activities for postgraduates?
- What could it do to assist this further, that it is not doing already?
- Can you think of any other relevant information not addressed directly by these questions?

The same questionnaire will be sent out to each institution regardless of its model (though specific questions to certain institutions may be appended should the nature of their operation be unclear), but one of the primary objectives of the research will be to compare and contrast the responses received from institutions of each type, in order to discover whether there are any general trends that could suggest best-practice recommendations. It may, of course, be revealed that each institution simply handles things in its own way, for its own reasons. Yet, even if this conclusion is reached, the work will not have been a wasted effort, as it may still be possible to recommend less severe alterations to procedures that could nonetheless bring measurable benefits to the lives of postgraduates, in helping them to become more involved in a programme of relevant, interesting and enjoyable student activities.

Timetable:

November: draw up finalised survey

Early December: email completed survey directly to relevant postgraduate representatives/officers sourced through links on the NPC web site, and others

January: collect and compile responses as they are received

Early February: collate data; analyse; determine conclusions

February-March: compile report

April: table at nearest OGM for discussion, to solicit suggestions for amendments and to consider options for publication

May: table final report; publish as determined.