

The National Postgraduate Committee  
**Ordinary General Meeting**  
Saturday 27th January 2007

Hosted by:

University of London Union

ULU

**Ordinary General Meeting of the National Postgraduate Committee  
27 January 2007, University of London Union.**

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Please note: the Chairperson, Minutes Secretary, and ordinary Executive Officers are not required to give reports, though they may wish to do so.

- 8.0 Election of Minutes Secretary
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Two delegates (Normally one male and one female).
- 10.0 Consultations
  - 10.1 A consultation on a new charging regime for immigration and nationality fees
  - 10.2 Submission by the National Postgraduate Committee of the United Kingdom to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee Inquiry into The Future Sustainability of the Higher Education Sector: purpose, funding and structures
  - 10.3 Submission by the National Postgraduate Committee of the United Kingdom to the House of Commons Education and Skills Committee Inquiry into The Bologna Process.
  - 10.4 NPC / NUS Submission to Department of Communities and Local Government and Department for Education and Skills on Postgraduate Council Tax.

### 3.0 Minutes

## Minutes of the NPC Ordinary General Meeting held in Vanbrugh College of The University of York on Saturday 11th and Sunday 12th November 2006

The OGM started at 2:00pm with Jen Winter in the Chair. Simon Felton volunteered to take minutes in the absence of a Minutes Secretary.

#### Sederunt

##### *Delegate Members:*

James Caspell	London School of Economics
Montserrat Cols Vidal	Keele University
Chris Whittaker	Southampton University
Oleg Lisagor	The University of York
Tim Roll-Pickering	University of London Union

##### *Associate Members:*

Simon Felton	NPC General Secretary
Jen Winter	NPC Chair
Jim Ewing	Chairperson NPC Scotland

##### *Honorary Life Members:*

Peter Campbell	NPC Constitutional Subcommittee
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##### *Apologies:*

Brian Duggan	University of Warwick
David Thurkettle	University of Keele — PGA
Chandan Singh	Staffordshire University
Alex Higgins	Sussex University
Armineh Soorenian	University of Leeds
Margaret Davine	MSU
Peter Mason	University of Birmingham
James Groves	NPC Constitutional Subcommittee
Duncan Connors	NPC Constitutional Subcommittee
Marilyn Shanks	University of Essex
Jimmy Tam	LSE
Be Pringle	University of Nottingham
Ian Dublon	Keele University
Rhys Kearney	Salford University
Martin Gough	Financial Subcommittee

Oleg Lisagor questioned the quorum of the meeting. He questioned the professional nature of the chair not having the quoracy figure. Tim Roll-Pickering confirmed the quoracy as 3 due to the start of the new year and the number of affiliates being low.

#### **New affiliates**

There had been no new affiliates since the last OGM.

#### **New associate members**

There were no new associate members.

#### *Chairs Address*

This could be exciting year. We have an almost entirely new exec who are enthusiastic. We have the power to make real difference at national level if only we grasp it. There is a danger that we will become a talking heads forum and not the lobbying power we deserve. Postgraduate population huge and NUS not representing postgrads. We need to make sure we are heading in right direction and not just policy but from delegates

## **Minutes of previous meetings**

### **NPC MSC Meeting**

The minutes of the NPC Management Subcommittee meeting held in the Keele Postgraduate Association clubhouse of Keele Postgraduate Association on Sunday 10th September 2006 were presented to the meeting for ratification.

Jen enquired whether there were any matters arising. There were no matters arising.

### **Motions**

Simon explained that there were not any received but he suggested that we create a motion or statement of intent on what we believe a PhD is from the discussion that would follow

### **Financial Report**

Tim referred to the financial report that had been tabled. As always, he was interested in suggestions for improving the presentation of the report.. This was presented on the room projector due to being unable to print the report but confirmed that it was available online..

Tim explained that current assets are just under £28K. There are a few outstanding liabilities. There is an audit outstanding and there are various payments that remain to be debited from the account. Tim showed the balance sheet and highlighted that we had received some affiliation payments but some were still being received.

Oleg Lisagor asked about the attendance at conferences budget heading. Tim confirmed this was for conferences attended on NPC behalf, for example NUS conference stall and currently totalled £20 for SRHE event Simon had attended.

Jen Winter raised that the biggest concern financially was Eurodoc funding. Tim responded that some of the money would not pass the bank account but Simon was dealing with Eurodoc fundraising. Oleg questioned what Eurodoc was and what costs are involved. Tim replied that ideal cost would be zero to NPC but we are holding a contingency element to cover costs. The conference would be a good opportunity to promote the interests of the NPC and raise its profile.

Oleg also enquired about what the total budget for year was. Tim confirmed this was a £500 deficit with an expected income of £22,050.00

The question of the cost of auditing was also raised and Tim confirmed this was necessary for charity status as was the cost of insurance which was an employee liability that ensured any advice given by the General secretary was liable to suing.

## **Reports from officers**

Communications Officer - Chris Whittaker:

Simon said it would be useful for Chris Whittaker to use his report to discuss the new website. Chris presented the old and new versions of the website.

Jen Winter questioned the text heaviness and the big blue box on what is the NPC. Simon also added that there were stock photos to be added to add pictures to the frontpage.

There was a discussion on the links on the left hand side of the page and the priority of those listed. It was agreed that the priority should be what is the NPC followed by the What is... section. The devolved nations should be a lower priority. Chris highlighted the MSNBC website and the example of an expanding list as a possible aesthetic improvement.

It was noted that the author and date under documents on the postgraduate facts and issues page need highlighting to show the full list of documents.

Oleg questioned whether the appearance was an issue so long as the content was on the site. Chris responded that as a Vice President Education he would look to other sites elsewhere if looking for information to which he could not find quickly. The website needed to reflect this and become clearer.

It was noted and agreed by all that the website needs to be redesigned for students in the UK and not just officers and others involved in education such as attending this meeting. Jen noted that there needed to be more use of the term students, postgraduates, PhD, and Masters for attracting internet searches to the site as these were terms postgraduates identified themselves as.

Chris concluded his report by asking for articles for the new version of the Pn newsletter.

General Secretary — Simon Felton

Oleg asked Simon about his report and any issues he wished to flag up as it represented more of a blog than a report. Simon noted the meeting with Bill Rammell which he attended with Tim and Richard Angell from NUS. The meeting had been on the issue of council tax exemption for writing-up students and the meeting and supporting document would hopefully be successful at persuading the DfES and DCLG to undertake a relatively small task.

Simon also noted the industrial tribunal which he is being called as a witness to. This would have profound implications on student-supervisor relations. The case was taking place at Cardiff and was against a supervisor who was deemed to be having too close a relationship with a student. Oleg noted this was a cause worthy of fighting to national level.

Simon also noted the forthcoming UCU Postgraduate who Teach Charter. Tim Roll-Pickering assisted in explaining the background to the document with the two versions for the respective unions, NATFHE and the AUT.

Oleg asked if there were problems and issues that Simon had been unable to do. Simon responded that ongoing student complaint support. He also raised issue of European Research Charter and the issue of the institution previously studied at. This was debated following Simon's explanation of the relevant clause and the issue of how far it should matter what your previous was when applying or studying at postgraduate level particularly research.

The debate continued to extend to the power of the general secretary to provide view of NPC without membership approval. Simon clarified that he was empowered to respond on existing policy or interpreting policy to respond to any consultation or issue that arose. This was important to ensure the view of NPC and postgraduate students was raised when certain issues arose quickly in the public domain.

There was a ten minute break at 3.05 pm

Before the opening of nominations to the role of Minutes Secretary Peter Campbell clarified the role of the equal opportunities officer to allow anyone to participate in work of the NPC.

No one stood for nomination and the election was deferred until the next Ordinary General Meeting.

### **Election to Conferences**

UKCGE Winter Conference in February — Jen and Simon nominated themselves. All present in meeting agreed with no abstentions. Simon would provide details to UKCGE of the delegates.

Eurodoc: Nice Conference— Simon clarified the Eurodoc conference and funding costs. James nominated himself and was elected by unanimous agreement.

NUS Anti-bullying Day — Peter outlined the event. Peter showed the blog outlining the event. No one was able to attend. Simon agreed to send out details to exec and add to the forum to attract someone to attend.

Simon would pass on details to Armineh as it related to her remit.

Peter Campbell noted the Consumer Ethos in Universities Today An opportunity for renewal conference 22-24 November at Cumberland lodge. He noted this would be interesting for people to attend. Simon would advertise the conference on the forum.

### **Consultations for ratification**

The following consultation responses were passed round for ratification by the meeting:

- RAE Consultation
- The NPC / NUS joint report on Council Tax exemption for writing-up students.

#### RAE Consultation

Jim Ewing noted grammatical mistakes in the RAE consultation response, particularly section 2, The NPC believes that all the important metrics have not been identified.

Jim also questioned the term metrics. Jen explained and clarified that a lot of the problem with the current proposals is that universities receiving lots of money will get more and those receiving less will receive less. Jen clarified that the new system may be useful for some institutions.

Simon clarified that the response was a narrow response to the consultation questions. Oleg asked for the consultation to not be ratified as there was not supporting evidence on the consultation in its context.

The ratification of the RAE consultation was voted on with the following results:

In favour: 3

Against: 1

#### The NPC / NUS joint report on Council Tax exemption for writing-up students.

Simon asked for comments on the document which had been written by Richard Angell based on research Tim and Simon had undertaken.

Jen clarified the variation in council tax exemption for writing-up students. Tim clarified further to a question from Chris that it is a mix of the responsibility of the council and the institution.

Chris asked about writing up students who aren't registered as students and how would they be affected by the document and proposals. Jen clarified that at York to be registered you would need to pay fees.

Oleg delegate clarified that local unions would need to lobby institution for students to be registered. He also asked need to consider those students who are writing up but working. Simon clarified that DfES asked about this and Jen said if they are working they are effectively part time and would therefore not be exempt.

There was a discussion of those students who may work part time and those who would exceed a set number of hours. This extended into a consideration of council tax benefit.

Chris asked how reasonable this is. Simon, Tim and Jen clarified that it was a welfare issue that the ministers were concerned with and said should be sorted out relatively easily.

James Caspell asked for the example motion to be added to the website.

Simon thanked everyone for their useful comments.

### **Consultations for Discussion**

Peter Campbell presented the Immigration Charging Consultation which he had noted from the NUS.

Jim Ewing noted the 2003 policy file which said NPC was opposed to extending visa fees. In 2004 Jim sent in consultation submission noting that there should be a single block of time to take account of those collecting their certificate. The NPC believed that students should be exempt from charges.

Oleg felt that international students should be exempt from charges and visa extension. Oleg also noted that when international students arrive in York, students can often receive a stamp for one year rather than three years. The consultation appears to assume regime as it is. In response we should deliver our fundamental position.

It was noted that each affiliate should provide responses to the questions to return to the General Secretary to collect and produce a response.

Question 1: Yes. Students bring income and are limited in the finance they take out. There should not be differentiation in student rate.

Question 2: Not within student body. Concern over students bringing families into UK would face increased hardship. It would overcomplicate system and would raise costs associated with running system.

Question 3: NA

Question 4: a) No fees would be better at creating a competitive destination.

c) Agree. But no fees would be better. The costs should be covered by general taxation due to benefit of students studying in UK.

Question 5: Yes. It may benefit students who are sponsored.

Question 6: Duty of institutions to ensure support for students by employing advisers in immigration law. Government should liaise and support process.

Institutional practice to support extension of visas, for example writing up students and month by month extension.

Question 7: NA but it would be useful to ask University of London specialist colleges for their views.

Question 8: Specialist group — students should be exempt. Or one fee should cover whole stage. Postgraduates going into writing-up year. Students applying for extension for same degree should not pay extension fee. Immigration officials to visit institutions to extend visas in person.

Question 9: We don't feel the proposals would affect community relations.

Simon clarified that NPC will consult directly with its members to gain their views and also ask UUK about their view and use that to help shape views.

### **Any other business**

- Peter Campbell questioned if we could approve AGM minutes in parts to approve the new committee.
- Oleg Lisagor noted that York will be looking into disaffiliating. York has feeling NPC does not provide much value and has noted this for a number of years. Recognise that may be of more value to those institutions that are creating postgraduate associations. They furthermore consider the constitution overburdensome.

York will produce paper on what NPC needs to do. Jen and Rep will produce guide on what they wish to see from the NPC.

- Career Development Loan. Simon asked for views as he was being interviewed by the Learning Skills Council. It was noted by some present that any commercial funding opportunity better than none.
- The next OGM would attract more people and be easier to host in London. Tim will find an institution or union to host the meeting. We would start at 11.30am. One of the major discussions would be (Re)defining the PhD. It was agreed the meeting would take place on the 27th January in a one day meeting to avoid the cost of accommodation in London overnight.

**The formal meeting was closed at 5:30pm.**

4.0 Matters Arising — Your opportunity to raise issues from the minutes.

5.0 Motions

Please Refer to Addendum

## 7.0 Reports

### 7.1 General Secretary — Simon Felton

This has been a demanding period between the last OGM and this present one. There has been substantial consultation responses requiring significant feedback from students and student officers together with collating existing policy. These responses can be found in the consultation section in section 10.

It has also been one of disappointment in the key aim of supporting students with the Industrial Tribunal deferred until this spring due to witness arrangements with the university concerned and a draft decision by the OIA going against a student the NPC has been supporting.

The NPC has continued to gain media recognition and work with partners. A chapter I am writing for a new Guide to Research Degrees has led to a request for a supporting statement for the book.. This will further raise awareness of the organisation and I have been cited in a number of articles defending postgraduates. This has obviously been noticed with attendance at one conference being noted for 'you're the one always moaning about supervision'.

The continued recognition of the NPC's voice for postgraduates has led us to be invited to join the NUS Higher Education Quality Steering Group which plans Quality Takes Time Events and works alongside the QAA in embedding the role of representation. We have also been invited alongside NUS and AMSU to present to the board of the QAA on student issues and this should provide a further chance to highlight the need to embed representation and support, particularly for postgraduates.

The NPC has been invited to participate in the Annual Postgraduate Conference hosted by Neil Stewarts and I have also been asked to support the SPARQS postgraduate group at supporting postgraduate representational structures.

The future is not secure and the continuing shadow of student debt, immigration visa charges and academic freedom all continue to highlight the need to work in solidarity to protect the rights and interests of postgraduates.

Weekly Diary:

#### **Week Commencing 13th November 2006**

Monday 13th — Interview with Learning Skills Council, based in Birmingham on Career Development Loans. I noted the large number of students unable to access such funds and the National Postgraduate Committee opposition to the commercial interest rates and short repayment periods. They do offer a source of finance for those able to access but they still leave a large proportion of students ineligible and remain unfair.

Tuesday 14th — Attend the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey working group in York.

The survey was on schedule for a launch in March 2007. A letter and approaches for participation would be sent to Vice Chancellors and Research Degree co-ordinators in a letter

signed by lead on project and myself to signify the importance of student involvement and feedback.

There were 7 institutions in the trial with 20 wanting to participate.

Wednesday 15th — Attended the Rugby Team working group on the evaluation of skills training in London. This was productive and discussed some of the future work of the Rugby Team and where it should head to. Pam Denicolo from Reading was conducting research into awareness of supervisors, PIs (Principal Investigators) and students into research training and I assisted Pam with analysing some interview responses.

Also discussed Chris Park's paper on Redefining the Doctorate which would the National Postgraduate Committee would use as a basis for discussion at the next Ordinary General Meeting in January. It was questioned about the ability of the outcome of discussions to change very institutional decisions but the discussion reasoned a 'big tent' approach to including everyone with an interest would help to shape the agenda.

A concern I raised was the small number of institutions awarding the majority of PhDs and the need to ensure any move to consolidate the PhD did not force changes on other forms of doctorate in other institutions.

Some of the meeting discussed gaining the views of employers and also the limited ability to gain pre-robarts funding views and the need to start research as soon as possible to gain this pre-robarts data.

#### **Week Commencing 20th November 2006**

Monday 20th November — attended QAA bilateral at Gloucester to discuss mutual cooperation and projects. Discussed handover arrangements for my successor and ensuring they receive briefing from QAA, HEFCE et al alongside NUS where possible.

Also discussed researcher conference in June 2007 which NPC would support, albeit not financially and NPC would provide a logo for inclusion on publicity.

The QAA were keen to get the NPC's outcomes from our discussion on What is a PhD from the January OGM with its links to the QAA review of 'M' level ness.

Tuesday 21st November — Ran a workshop on postgraduates and bullying at the NUS Anti-bullying day in Leicester. This was really successful and I was able to discuss both bullying and wider issues associated such as supervision and representation with affiliates and non-affiliates.

Roger Kline from UCU was present and led an informative discussion highlighting that TUC estimate over 5m people are being bullied and how Student Unions are working with UCU through regional offices or university secretaries on the issue.

Ama launched the NUS anti-bullying survey and I am hoping we can encourage postgraduates to participate and gain some data on the extent of postgraduates affected by bullying.

Thursday 23rd — Attended the Academic Registrars Council Postgraduate Group meeting at Birmingham University. I was able to attend and met up with Janet Bohrer from QAA and Davina Foord from UUK.

The agenda was particularly relevant with presentations on the implications of the RAE on funding, part-time students and funding, the impact of undergraduate debt on postgraduate registrations and Bologna and its impact on research degrees.

An interesting discussion particularly with a representative of Prospects highlighted the role potentially of the NUS and also of the NPC in helping students make the decision to do postgraduate study earlier. It was noted many students leave the decision too late.

The NPC was also invited to participate with Eurodoc in a debate post London 2007 Bologna meeting with the EUA.

Friday 24th — Attended Aldwych meeting at Nottingham. This was great to meet with fellow affiliates and discuss Nottingham's implementation of the sabbatical Postgraduate Chair that had been approved by their union council.

The meeting was also a welcome to Queens, Belfast who had just become members of the Russell Group.

Discussions included the continuing development of Aldwych as the Russell Group had appointed a new Director General who Brian Duggan from Warwick would be meeting in January. The Chair of the Russell Group had suggested that the thinking and direction of the Russell Group would come from the Director General with the group being a 'thinktank' leading Whitehall. This poses some difficult questions to the Aldwych group and diversity and inclusion at Russell Group institutions.

A large part of the meeting discussed the idea of an administrator to co-ordinate Aldwych activities to challenge the Russell Groups increasing strategic development. It was broadly agreed to vary extent and issue that this was important and different unions would come to the next meeting with example job descriptions and costing calculations.

### **Week Commencing 11th December 2006**

Disappointingly I had to send apologies for the Nice conference with Eurodoc due to being on call to be a witness at an industrial tribunal. This was cancelled due to the institution needing to sort out witnesses and has been rescheduled for Spring 2007. I also had to cancel attending Bath PGA AGM due to ill health and will be visiting them in early 2007.

Tuesday 12th December — Attended UCU bilateral in London to discuss mutual issues and campaigns. There had been a nice report on the Annual Conference in the UCU magazine with a page on postgraduates. NPC and UCU also discussed responses to the two House of Commons Education Select Committee consultations which had been taking up my time prior to the meeting and would subsequently do so. We also discussed Bologna and the impact on the UK of the process with regard to mobility, credit and masters degrees.

The UCU website would be relaunched in January 2007. The NPC would use some information from the new site to encourage those postgraduates teaching or able to join UCU to do so for their benefit.

Wednesday 13th December — Attended the QAA Code of Practice Working Group revising the Code of Practice on Complaints and Appeals. This meeting discussed the feedback from the first of the Round Table meetings to get institutions and interested parties views. There was a clear need to emphasise that Postgraduate students were covered and the need to refer to the responsibilities of students. There was also a concern over language and the need to define complaint and appeal.

The outcomes of a QAA meeting with OIA were also noted, with the OIA's definition of academic judgement being course content, nature of the curriculum, decisions about assessment conduct and marks given for a piece of work and subsequently not for OIA investigation.

The OIA received 1000 enquiries per year with the number of disabilities cases enquiries increasing. A substantial number of all the cases were research students and largely within the frame of supervision.

The discussion of outcomes from the rountable at the meeting centred on three area: the title, students with impairments and whether to split sections on complaints and appeals.

The remainder of the week was spent completing the responses which are available online. The week was also spent finalising the Home Office Immigration Fees consultation based on a few comments from unions.

**Week Commencing January 8th** — After moving offices in the previous week I had been settling in and completing administration regarding outstanding affiliation payments, conference planning for Eurodoc.

BUGS has recently created a Postgraduate Space which I am located adjacent to and which I hope will be as successful as the Cardiff space.

7.2 NPC Scotland (Chairperson) — Jim Ewing

Verbal Report to be given.

7.3 Conference Secretary — David Thurkettle

On behalf of David, I can confirm the date and location of the conference has been finalised. Discussions into a programme and theme are ongoing and we would invite suggestions and ideas.

The Annual Conference will take place at Keele University from 9th — 11th August 2007.

7.4 Communications Officer — Chris Whittaker

7.5 Equal Opportunities Officer — Armineh Soorenian

See Addendum

7.6 Project Officers

7.6.1 Chandan Singh

My report is about findings of accomodation issues among student's with the respect to their backgrounds while their studies within University.

At the moment I am trying to collect as much as data as I can through my various contacts to prepare my report.

*Chandan is currently engaged in union activities and will return to his project in the next month.*

## 7.6.2 Rhys Kearney

On greater appreciation of postgraduate representation and its complexities I have restructured the brief of my project. The original aim was to try and come up with best practice guidelines – a kind of gold standard way in which support institutions should provide for postgraduates. I believe this brief is too ambitious for the resources I have available to commit given the complexities involved in trying to create one standard for what is a diverse population.

The revised brief is not wholly unrelated – the idea is to produce a standard three-fold pamphlet which not only introduces the NPC but also outlines the most important issues facing postgraduates, information relevant to both student and support officers.

The research I have undertaken has led me to appreciate the wealth of resources available on the NPC website which cover a whole range of topics. The pamphlet would direct the reader to those resources on the key areas highlighted as well as give pointers on where they can find out more on other stuff as well. Ideally there would be an online version of the pamphlet so that only one link is required. The online version would then link to the main website given the subject of interest. I expect the pamphlet would be formatted in a similar style to the newly launched NPC website

The aim of the pamphlet is to promote the NPC and to create a greater awareness of those particular factors affecting postgraduates and the resources provided by the NPC which would assist in the provision of support.

Rhys Kearney.

## 7.6.3 Dan Snowdon

### Update on what I have done so far

The Postgraduate Students' Charter at ULU has started to evolve and as a result I am organising a Postgraduate Roadshow across the University of London to promote the Postgraduate Academic Advice Service and the charter itself. We will be asking Postgraduates to sign up to the charter in agreement and to collate their names in order to run a London-wide Network for Postgraduates.

The Postgraduate Advice Service at ULU has really taken off with students' contacting us directly regarding their issues. I have reports on the specifics that I would like to go through at the OGM.

I have also written an extensive document about the state of play for Postgraduates in Higher Education. This is London specific but certainly follows similar patterns across the country.

### My Proposal — As a reminder

For my project I want to raise awareness on the issues that arise through supervision. This would include the following:

- Lobbying Universities (who do not currently enforce the QAA recommendations for supervision) to comply.

- Highlight the disparities of the levels of supervision that PhD students experience by formulating an online questionnaire about the student experience regarding supervision. This would be put on the NPC website with links from ULU and other students' unions websites.
- To finally write a detailed report of recommendations to be submitted to the QAA and the Department for Education and Skills outlining the problems students face with supervision.
- I will propose at the NPC Conference that the NPC adopt this as an ongoing piece of work so that the next stage can be fulfilled — to ensure that they take our recommendations seriously.

#### 7.6.4 Alex Higgins

Alex has passed on notice that due to personal circumstances he is unsure how his project will proceed and if it will reach conclusion.

#### 7.7 Journal of Graduate Education — Dr Martin Gough

Verbal Report to be given.

#### 7.8 Any other reports

##### 7.8.1 James Caspell — NPC delegate for Eurodoc delegation to Nice Conference

Workgroup Report: The Connection Between Masters and Phd

- Across Europe, the main entrance to the PhD 'cycle' is via a Masters though some countries, such as Germany, have several other routes available.
- Level of research preparation during Masters varies from university to university, country to country.
- It was agreed that there needs to be some degree of professionalisation in the PhD cycle which provides transferable skills and vocational guidance for the changing European labour market for those doctoral researchers who may at some point look beyond an academic career.
- A doctorate should be viewed as not only the production of original research for the benefit of society, but also a process of development for the researcher, preparing him/her for both a research career but also a non-academic related career.
- Regarding this issue, there was a discussion concerning whether there should be different paths for different PhDs depending on whether students wished to focus on research as a preliminary step to an academic career, or if they wished to focus on the transferable skills it gave them to use in wider labour market instead of an academic career, yet still attracting maximum number of potential researchers in the first instance.
- **Advantages discussed of such a two-track PhD discussed were:**
- Give opportunity to design more specialised programmes allowing people to gain the generic and transferable skills needed for their future career, or focus more

specifically on academic niche for future postdoctoral research career.

- Recruiting and keeping the best and brightest students for doctoral programmes who would be put off by current system.
- **Disadvantages discussed of such a split were:**
- Making people choose early in their studies limits the recruitment pool for those who change their mind - and possibly the postdoctoral cycle might suffer the most from this.
- Many people pointed out that research and generic skills training should be imbedded in all three cycles and not only in the last (PhD) cycle, which seems to be a problem across Europe.
- **Final recommendations of workgroup:**
- Essential to maintain flexibility and insitutional autonomy regarding entry requirements and programmes, maximising potential of higher education institutions. All universities should be encouraged to provide the transferable skills required to attract potential doctoral students no matter what their career path may be after 3/4 years.
- Attention needs to be given to equity and access, regarding financial background, ethnicity, gender etc. across Europe. Identification of patterns of variation in different countries.
- Greater investment in PhD cycle required. Masters programme in particular should not depend on 'market forces' to keep open preparation to a range for research avenues amongst potential doctoral students.
- Government investment required in order ot provide range of doctoral research facilities across Europe.
- Given the growth of joint Masters/PhD degrees, important to maintain transparency to facilitate comparison and responsiveness to the internationalisation of higher education. Important to maintain that Masters' programmes across Europe provide similar level of preparation

## 8.0 Election of Minutes Secretary

Description of duties of Minutes Secretary from By-laws.

### 2.6 Minutes Secretary

2.6.1 The Minutes Secretary shall:

- a) Take minutes during General Meeting and MSC meetings, which shall include a record of all decisions made, and the figures of any vote where a count is requested.
- b) Write up the minutes for presentation to the following General Meeting and/or MSC meeting.

2.6.2 The outgoing Minutes Secretary shall be responsible for writing up the minutes at which his/her successor was elected.

## 9.0 Elections to Conferences

9.1 Eurodoc Annual Conference: London 15-17th March 2007.  
Two delegates (Normally one male and one female).

EURODOC is the European Council of doctoral candidates and young researchers. It takes the form of a federation of national associations of Ph.D. candidates and young researchers.

EURODOC's objectives are:

- To represent doctoral candidates and junior researchers at the European level in matters of education, research, and professional development of their careers.
- To advance the quality of doctoral programmes and the standards of research activity in Europe.
- To promote the circulation of information on issues regarding young researchers; organize events, take part in debates and assist in the elaboration of policies about Higher Education and Research in Europe.
- To establish and promote co-operation between national associations representing doctoral candidates and junior researchers within Europe.

## 10.0 Consultations

### 10.1 A consultation on a new charging regime for immigration and nationality fees

#### **Q1 Do you think that we should set prices flexibly to take into account wider policy objectives such as attracting international students and people on business?**

Yes

Comment: The National Postgraduate Committee believes that there should be a differentiation in prices to attract international students. International Students bring in substantial income to the United Kingdom but are limited in their ability to transfer this money with them.

We further believe that there should not be a differentiation within student fees.

#### **Q2 Should prices reflect a range of factors, or only those that are of value to the migrant?**

Factors of value to the migrant

Comment: The NPC believes that prices should not reflect a range of factors for the pricing of International Students. We believe that as many international students bring families into the UK, they would face increased hardship though a consideration of a range of factors. Such a system for judging a range of factors would overcomplicate the system and would increase the costs associated with running the system.

We assert the value of international students to the vibrancy of the UK, its economy and society and feel that it would be unfair to judge students according to a range of factors which would ignore their desire for active participation in the UK Higher Education system.

#### **Q3 Do you think that applications for citizenship should be priced according to value or to the costs of processing the application?**

Value Costs

Comment N/A

#### **Q4 With which of the following statements do you agree:**

- a) Fees should be set to help promote the UK as a competitive destination YES
- b) Fees should be set according to the same principles , but might vary between the UK and overseas
- c) Fees for the same service should be the same in the UK and overseas YES

*(You may choose more than one option)*

Comment: The National Postgraduate Committee has lobbied previously and continues to believe fees are offputting to attracting international students and believes that no fees would be better in creating a competitive destination for international students. The visa cost of entering international students should be met by general taxation to the benefit of students seeking to study in the UK and to recognise their value economically and socially to the UK.

While recognising the existence of fees currently, we believe that fees should not vary in cost for application between the UK and overseas to show that we value and actively seek international students and to highlight the attractiveness of higher education for both UK and overseas applicants.

#### **Q5 Should employers and educational institutions be able to include payment of visa fees within sponsorship and certificate fees for international employees and students?**

Yes

Comment : The NPC believes this would be of benefit to international students and particularly international postgraduate students who may seek sponsorship or funding from

their respective governments. Including visa fees in the total certificate or degree cost would remove the hidden nature of visa application fees to an already expensive process and Higher Education Institution fees.

**Q6 What help would sponsors need to ensure that they are acting legally in bringing in particular migrants?**

Comment The NPC feel it is the duty of institutions to ensure support for international students by employing advisers in Immigration law. The UK government should liaise and support this process, running an information Hub to guide these advisers in changes to the process and supporting the process.

Institutions would also be best supported by an agency or body within UK VISAS and Universities UK organisations to facilitate the sharing of best practice and support in handling the visa application process. This would particularly support institutions with specific needs for international and postgraduate students such as the extension of visas with regard to writing-up students or on a month by month extension.

**Q7 How might any impact on small and medium-sized businesses be minimised?**

Comment : N/A

**Q8 What special measures might be needed for cultural and specialist groups?**

Comment : The NPC believes international students, as a specialist group should be exempt from fees.

We recognise that fees have been introduced but believe that one fee should cover the whole student stage. This would be particularly important for postgraduates going into a writing-up year or period of time where they might not be recognised as completing their programmes. International postgraduate students entering their writing year should be able to apply for a visa extension but not pay an extension fee. Removing the fee would ease administrative burdens and most importantly support the international student to complete their programme by removing financial burden and worry.

Due to the specialist nature of students the NPC further believes that UK VISAs should visit institutions to extend visas in person. This would create a dialogue between institutions and the Visa application process and furthermore ease administration and support the student more practically.

**Q9 Do you think that any of the proposals outlined would impact adversely on community relations?**

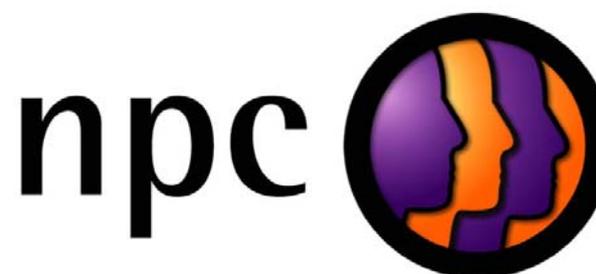
No

Comment : The NPC believes that the proposals would not impact adversely on community relations.

We do however feel that fees act as a deterrent to international students and therefore challenge the ability of institutions to broaden their programmes and institutional internationalisation. International students add to the vitality, learning experience of institutions and their surrounding areas. To ensure a diverse society and the associated benefits of cultures mixing international students should be encouraged and fees should be removed or lessened to support this process.

10.2 **Submission by the National  
Postgraduate Committee of  
the United Kingdom to the  
House of Commons  
Education and Skills  
Committee Inquiry into The  
Future Sustainability of the  
Higher Education Sector:  
purpose, funding and  
structures**

December 18th 2006



## **Executive Summary**

Higher Education offers a valuable opportunity to develop individuals, society and the economy. Postgraduates are best placed to ensure Higher Education provides these opportunities and it is crucial that the funding arrangements and future of institutions is secure to retain and develop the UK's excellence in research and development and that the holistic support for postgraduates facilitates such excellence.

## **The National Postgraduate Committee of the United Kingdom**

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) represents over 500,000 postgraduate students. It is the principal representative body of postgraduate students in the UK. As a registered charity (no. SC033368), our aim is to promote, in the public interest, postgraduate education in the UK. We share best practice through publications and meetings, respond to consultations, address conferences and take on casework. In the furtherance of our aims, we co-operate with other like-minded democratic student bodies, professional associations and trades unions.

## **The role of universities over the next 5—10 years**

The National Postgraduate Committee has welcomed the governments recognition of research as a part of higher education to support the knowledge based economy (<http://www.npc.org.uk/media/postgraduatepolicyresponses/consultations2003/npc0304bdepartmentforeducationandskillsresponsetothehighereducationstrategywhitepaper>). Furthermore the NPC recognise the world class reputation of our Higher Education and welcome its benefits to civil society, culture, personal fulfillment and economic development and wealth creation. The government must continue to develop Higher Education to enable these benefits but ensure that significant spending comes from the public sector in recognition of the linked role all stages of education play in the development of society and the economy.

Postgraduate students make a significant contribution to the research undertaken in UK universities and the UK. The skills and knowledge developed by postgraduate students benefits the economy and society when researchers use their skills in future employment. The success of the Roberts Skills Agenda highlights the value of public investment in research which enhances the strategic capacity of those groups employing postgraduate researchers and their wider benefit to society. Furthermore as the ageing academic labour force retires, postgraduate researchers are able to contribute fully to academic regeneration. Ensuring benefit to society and the economy can be further achieved through Higher Education thematic priorities such as SET to ensure postgraduate programmes are fully supported and recognized as part of key education funding priorities. Using thematic priorities and assessing research proposals on social and cultural benefit as well as economic and environmental benefit would emphasise that research is valued and considered to be integral to a national research strategy.

It is evident that concentration of research towards higher rated research units, and possibly research intensive institutions will enable not only the ability to recruit and retain researchers as well as research students but also to overcome the backlog of infrastructure and lack of resources that have accumulated over the years. However, the concentration of research funding does concern us in that better research funding of such research units will happen at the expense of losing research units with significant potential in other areas.

NPC strongly feel that high research quality does not have a bearing upon the quality of the research environment in which research students can be appropriately trained and supported. It could be the case that some research students will not find large, highly rated research units supportive and suitably geared in a way that will successfully take them as a student through a research programme. Smaller research units, that may otherwise not have as high a rating in their research quality, may offer a more suitable environment to allow their students to achieve research potential. Removal of such units may significantly reduce the options open to prospective postgraduates, which could bear a significant limit on widening participation in postgraduate education. We are concerned at present as to how the current plans to widen access at undergraduate level will extend to postgraduate qualifications for those who wish to continue. Retaining the choice and variety of institutions in order to make this possible is vital, under current proposals large research units will not be suitably geared to meet these interests.

### **Knowledge Transfer**

In our experience it is largely the case that taught master level degrees and of course research degrees will require access to academic research as a support to the teaching and the research that students will carry out. With the reduction and possibly removal of research in some institutions we are concerned that this will severely affect the availability of higher degrees and in turn the choice that prospective postgraduates will have. We envisage that there will be greater availability of higher degrees in large research intensive institutions rather than knowledge transfer institutions.

As mentioned in the previous section, we strongly feel there that research quality does not bear any relation to the quality of teaching, support and development of individual students. Such factors are vital in developing the interests of graduates who have progressed significantly during their undergraduate degree. It may be that an undergraduate who has achieved well in a knowledge transfer institution wishes to continue to research and undertake a postgraduate qualification although the institution may not be able to provide this. Therefore this could provide an uncertain and uncomfortable future when moving to a larger research intensive institution with a significantly different environment. This could also have serious implications in terms of extending the widening participation agenda to encourage able students to progress towards higher degrees.

In conclusion, we acknowledge the need to enhance education at foundation level especially although we are concerned about the implications this could have on the future of postgraduate education, both taught and research. We therefore urge the government to ensure this will not be affected to enable all graduates to achieve as highly as possible

### **University-Industry research collaboration**

The National Postgraduate Committee welcomes opportunities for research collaboration between universities and industry. NPC believes that collaborative research between the private and higher education sectors can be mutually beneficial, but also recognises that unless institutional policy is developed to protect students from highly directed projects, this collaboration can be problematic.

NPC believes that institutions should ensure policy is established prior to the commencement of research that agrees issues such as intellectual property, timing and confidentiality of publications, responsibilities of supervisor/s, funding, academic freedom, and, reporting requirements to the private sector collaborator. NPC believes that regardless of whether postgraduate students undertake their research on a university campus, in a public research

facility or in an industrial location, all students should have access to student support services and to their postgraduate student association.

## University funding

### **Teaching and Research**

The National Postgraduate Committee recognizes the dual importance and crucial link between Teaching and Research. Teaching should be recognized as having equal status, prestige and value as research.

The experience of all students, both research and taught is affected by the quality of university research, the quality of teaching informed by that research and the quality of the university research infrastructure. Research funding should continue through the research assessment exercise by using a single system that values peer review while using limited metrics within discipline specific modifications. A single overarching system would prevent unfair funding distribution and allow new cross-disciplinary research. Research funding however should not be used to prevent cutting edge research in less favourably rated departments from taking place. Research funding should not be directed solely at institutions that are research intensive with funding ringfenced to other institutions for developing or creating interdisciplinary or inter-institutional research. Research funding, particularly for less research intensive institutions, should not follow a one-size-fits-all approach and recognize the mission of the institution and its role in the research field while also protect areas where market failure is greatest.

The National Postgraduate Committee recognizes academic freedom and 'blue skies thinking' which should be protected and developed. Metrics based models are biased against new researchers as departments seek to build experienced researchers for metric output. We further feel that research funding focus should encompass training and development of researchers to ensure quality research is taking place and provide opportunities for new researchers and new research. Moves to increase equal opportunities must be maintained and any move by metrics to increase the attractiveness of a 'transfer market' must be prevented.

The National Postgraduate Committee believes that benchmarking is positive tool and should be reflected in research funding but that benchmarking should be a separate function to the allocation of all research funding. Benchmarking takes place in the public sector to assess and evaluate performance but is rarely used as a sole determinant of funding. The opportunity for benchmarking is for capacity building to encourage funding as a tool alongside other criteria.

### **Should the cap be raised and what would the consequences be?**

The National Postgraduate Committee is opposed to the cap on fees being raised as it would challenge access and create a marketised Higher Education system where access is based on the ability to pay and not on individuals merit. NPC believes that education as a funded public service results in benefits for society, the economy, employers and the learner. We are opposed to increased costs being passed to the learner and the opportunity for self and societal development to be prevented by fear of cost.

The National Postgraduate believe students should not pay tuition fees as they prevent access to higher education and prevent progress onto postgraduate courses. We are opposed to any increase in undergraduate tuition fees as this will create larger debts for undergraduates and pressure the market to raise postgraduate and particularly Masters fees.

Debt, particularly for those students seeking to develop themselves and wider society is unfair and will prevent those who might benefit most from access. The demographics of

postgraduate programmes needs encouragement to attract women, ethnic minorities and other vulnerable groups; increased undergraduate debt will deter non-traditional groups from accessing postgraduate opportunities.

NPC believes the consequences for raising the cap would be an increased burden on students through increasing levels of debt and the limiting of access and progression to postgraduate study.

### **Increasing Debt and its impact on postgraduate programmes**

Current levels of graduate debt are disputed but banks and other financial service providers usually consider the graduate debt figure above official government figures. An example of the increasing cost is the Barclays Bank Graduate Debt Survey which showed in 1994, the average graduate debt was £2,212. By 2005, this had increased to £13,501<sup>1</sup>. Former Education Secretary Charles Clarke estimated that students who attend universities that charge the full top-up fees will graduate with debts of £21,000<sup>2</sup>. Current Hobsons research on 5662 current undergraduates in years 1-3 considering postgraduate study showed that 28% students had £10,001 to £15,000 of current debt.

These debts are particularly offputting for students who must take longer courses such as medical students with the BMA stating in research before top-up fees were introduced that a fifth of medical students owe more than £30,000 in their final year<sup>3</sup>. For engineering courses the EPSRC noted that the potential impact of debt on entry into postgraduate programmes would be high due to the impact of accumulating 'undergraduate debt in engineering which it estimates to be 20% higher than the average and substantially higher than the arts' presumably reflecting the length of programmes (Ackers, 2006, p.31).

Although too early to see the impact of debt on postgraduate applications it is clear from interviews that carrying forward debt might deter students from pursuing further study (Ackers, 2006, p.31).

"Yes we do find it difficult to obtain applications from high quality UK PhD students and the reason for that's fairly obvious - if you're a bright young graduate with a first class degree and a big overdraft the last thing you want to do is be a student for 3 more years in a city with a high cost of living" [HoS, EPSRC cited in Ackers, 2006, p.31]

### **Debt affects the demographic**

The impact of increased debt will further challenge the demographics of those able to participate in postgraduate education as debt does not affect all members of society equally. DfES' research shows that those students in the lowest groups predicted average debts of £9,842 in 2004/05, compared to £7,733 among the middle groups and £6,905 for those from the highest<sup>4</sup>. In National Postgraduate Committee commissioned research from 2006 (<http://www.npc.org.uk/postgraduatefactsandissues/postgraduatepublications/marketfailureofpostgraduateeducationssurveyreport2006.pdf>) respondents from social class D were substantially more likely to report that financial concerns had a very strong influence on their choice of study mode. Furthermore the majority of those not intending to study (58%) reasoned that

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<sup>1</sup> Barclays Graduate Debt Survey 2005

<sup>2</sup> Breakfast with Frost, 20th Jan 2003

<sup>3</sup> BMA Survey of Medical Students' Finances, 2005

<sup>4</sup> DfES, Student Income and Expenditure Survey 2004/05, RR725

they were unable to afford it or it was too expensive. Almost three quarters said planned tuition fee and 62% debt from previous study was reason not to consider postgraduate study

The commitment to widening participation and promoting equality of opportunity at undergraduate may present problems of recruitment to postgraduate programmes as high quality students are forced to exit after their undergraduate programmes to provide for themselves financially (Ackers, 2006, p.39). Students from lower socio-economic groups are also more likely to seek financial income from part-time work and this will affect those who consider postgraduate study/

While undergraduate fees are deferred, postgraduate fees are not and these together with student living and other costs must be met as they arise and the burden of meeting basic living costs will act as a deterrent for students from lower socio-economic backgrounds.

Students from lower socio-economic backgrounds will work longer hours than students who enjoy greater levels of family financial support. The poorest students are far more likely to have to work during term-time. In a UNITE/Mori survey, 51% of C2DE students compared to 35% of AB students reported they worked during term-time. They also worked longer, on average 14.3 hours per week, compared to just 12.2 hours for AB students, and for less money £5.94 per hour on average for C2DE students compared to £7.21 per hour for AB students.

Research in the UK shows that students from groups at a disadvantage tend to enrol in lower level, shorter or more vocational courses, and closer to home. (Callender, 2003 and 2002; M Farr 'Home or Away'? 2001 quoted in Callender, 2003)

In Australia, which has a system similar to that in England, the introduction of fees and income-contingent loans has contributed to an increase in the proportion of young people living in the parental home after graduation. The median age of first homebuyers has also risen<sup>5</sup>.

Research on student debt has also meant that Australians are delaying having their first child, and choosing to have fewer children. The median age of Australian mothers at the birth of their first child rose from 24 in 1975 to 29 in 2000. Furthermore the indebtedness of graduates will have an impact on their ability to make the next steps in their lives, such as buying property and has the potential to widen the gap between rich and poor.

#### Debt is a deterrent

Research conducted by UUK and the National Union of Students shows that reluctance to take on debt, particularly for those from poorer backgrounds is a factor affecting access to higher education and which will impact on the ability to continue onto postgraduate education. Universities UK (UUK) Student Debt Project shows that the groups the government is trying to attract into HE are likely to be the most debt averse and the most concerned about the costs of HE (ie low-income groups, lone parents, students from certain minority ethnic groups)<sup>6</sup>, finding which were repeated in the NUS' Funding the Future research<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> The social and economic impact of student debt, Council of Australian Postgraduate Associations, 2003

<sup>6</sup> Claire Callender et al., 2003, Student Debt Project UUK. In this research, 84% of sixth formers and college students believed student debt deterred entry into HE and 88% of those questioned from the lower income groups believed that more people would go to university if grants were available.

<sup>7</sup> Watson and Church, 2003, Funding their Future: the attitudes of year 10 pupils to the HE, NUS

Such limited access to Higher Education by groups the government is trying to attract will limit the pool of prospective postgraduate students and will challenge the demographic of postgraduate students and the benefit research can bring to society and the economy.

Due to part time students, particularly at PhD level being less likely to complete their degrees than full time candidates and the large numbers of part-time students, there is a need for equity to support these students. Part time study is an option for a number of students due to caring responsibilities, disability, dependents employment and with a majority of students being aged 30 or over it is more likely that postgraduate students will need to accommodate these competing commitments than undergraduate students.

### **Internationalisation and the demographics of the Student Body**

The current demographics of postgraduate students reflects great diversity that would be threatened by increased levels of personal debt and unaffordability of postgraduate education. Most entrants to all types of postgraduate course are older than 22 with more older than 30 than below the age of 25 (Sastry, 2004). Part time students tend to be older, most being over 30, with almost a quarter of UK doctorate registered on a part-time basis. However the current postgraduate demographic masks the decline in domicile students which combined with the effect of increasing debt and increasing international students threatens the future UK knowledge based economy.

Research student numbers have shown a slight fall with UK domiciled entrants to research degree programmes having fallen by 17% but being partially offset by an increase in non-EU overseas students, whose numbers increased from a low base of 28 per cent between 1995-96 to 39 per cent of doctorates awarded in 2002-03. Although the actual numbers of doctoral awards are increasing, the proportions that are being awarded to UK domiciled students are similar to a decade ago. In 1994/95, 58% of fulltime doctorates and 68% of part-time doctorates were awarded to UK domiciled students, in 2002-03 59% fulltime and 72% part-time doctorates were obtained by UK domiciled students (HESA Student Records, 2002/03).

The declining recruitment pool of 'home grown' researchers is mitigated by this ability to recruit researchers from abroad. In many fields international researchers now constitute the majority of contract research staff and doctoral candidates (Sastry, 2004, p.6).

International students make a valuable contribution to the internationalisation of the postgraduate community with some 36% of postgraduate research students in the UK being international students (Universities UK, 2005). However increasing overseas recruitment is seen as a means of increasing income generation for institutions through fees and explains low levels of recruitment of postgraduates from the EU and accession countries.

Overseas students are also highly concentrated in full time taught masters courses - a segment which they increasingly dominate. Almost half (48 per cent) of full-time taught masters students are from countries outside the EU, rising to 63 per cent if full-time taught masters students from other EU countries are included. This reflects the extent to which overseas postgraduates are concentrated in full-time taught masters study: 68% of all overseas postgraduates are studying full time for taught masters qualifications (the figure for UK students is 18%).

To ensure that postgraduate programmes are attractive there needs to be selective enhancement with an awareness that pay as a dimension shapes the relative attractiveness of

academic research careers and would encourage researchers to progress and remain within the UK academic sector.

### **Conclusion**

The continued funding of Higher Education is necessary and for postgraduate education fundamental to the attainment of a knowledge economy and the wider benefits of social development and economic potential. The government must fund education over other areas of policy due to the social, economic and individual transformation it enables.

Postgraduate research enables the UK to be competitive in the global research and knowledge economy and develops the economic potential of individuals and organisations employing postgraduates. The government must ensure public sector funding continues for Higher Education and particularly at ensuring researchers and postgraduates can complete their programmes without financial obstacle or burden.

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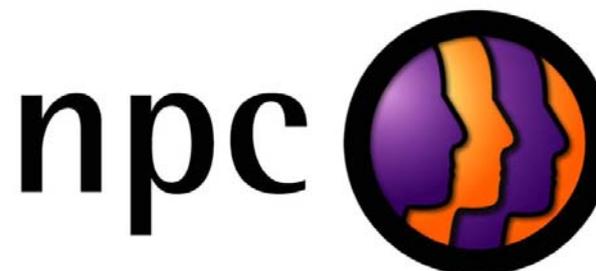
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<sup>10.3</sup> **Submission by the  
National Postgraduate  
Committee of the United  
Kingdom to the House of  
Commons Education and  
Skills Committee Inquiry  
into The Bologna Process**

December 18th 2006



## Executive Summary

*The Bologna process was created as a ten year programme which it is nearing its completion. The NPC urges more dissemination of information on the process to staff, institutions and importantly students to engage them in the process. The UK offers diverse and varied higher education experiences through student experience and higher education opportunities. The Bologna Process offers an opportunity for education to benefit society through access and its importance as a public good. Higher Education mobility must be protected to enrich the European knowledge economy.*

### **The National Postgraduate Committee of the United Kingdom**

The National Postgraduate Committee (NPC) represents over 500,000 postgraduate students. It is the principal representative body of postgraduate students in the UK. As a registered charity (no. SC033368), our aim is to promote, in the public interest, postgraduate education in the UK. We share best practice through publications and meetings, respond to consultations, address conferences and take on casework. In the furtherance of our aims, we co-operate with other like-minded democratic student bodies, professional associations and trades unions.

### **The NPC and the Bologna Process**

The National Postgraduate Committee has been a supporter of the Bologna Process both nationally and through EURODOC, the European Council of doctoral candidates and young researchers federation of which the UK is a member (<http://www.eurodoc.net>). The NPC has also been involved in the sector working group on the implementation of the European Charter and Code of Conduct for Researchers in the UK (<http://www.europeunit.ac.uk/resources/gapanalysis.pdf>). The Bologna Process is nearing its completion and the NPC agrees it is timely to reflect on the project and its achievements thus far to ensure its outcomes in making research an attractive career prospect and creating a knowledge economy with the support for all parties involved is achieved.

The NPC welcomes the Bologna Process as it promotes mobility and therefore emphasises the importance that education plays in the social dimension. The process sees Higher Education as a public good and co-operation rather than competition as a part of being a public responsibility.

As part of the NPC's involvement in the Bologna Process we are hosting the Eurodoc Annual Conference which seeks to produce policy outcomes and shape the student led agenda in postgraduate and postdoctoral education. The conference will be taking place between 15 and 17 March in London as a precursor to the next intergovernmental ministerial conference.

The NPC is however concerned that the awareness of the process by students, institutions, staff and employers has not increased during the process. The NPC would welcome a mapping exercise, similar to the UUK European Charter and Code of Conduct, to evaluate the embedding and output of the Bologna Process for stakeholders involved in the UK. The NPC would support the National Union of Students call to establish research into the implementation of the Bologna process and how for example institutions would pass the Diploma Supplement test and the Credit Test for example.

### **The Bologna Process**

The Bologna Process has been a massive success, resulting in agreement throughout Europe and opportunity to develop a knowledge economy, social mobility and sustained public good through investment in Higher Education. The process has furthermore set a standard in a global context which highlights the importance of Higher Education but which presents the process with a need to develop the opportunities for participating countries to remain competitive against other global schemes. This offers a real chance of engagement with all parties in the process and particularly students to ensure that the attainment of learning objectives is facilitated holistically.

## **Masters Degrees**

The question of duration of Masters programmes has been a key issue in considerations of the implications of the Bologna Process. The issue of Masters Degrees in relation to the Third Cycle — Doctoral Programmes will be outlined further below.

The National Postgraduate Committee recognise the variety and range of Masters' degrees in the UK as offering different learning outcomes which offer the opportunity to enrol in doctoral studies programmes. Masters degrees should offer learning outcomes and a variety of opportunity for career development and lifelong learning opportunities but ensure there is an ability to enrol in doctoral programmes.

The National Postgraduate Committee believes it is important that Masters fees are not left to market intervention due to their importance in relation to first and third cycle degrees. While institutions should seek to address the costs of providing Masters programmes, Masters programmes should be regulated to ensure those choosing courses are able to do so based on suitability rather than cost and to ensure that the widening participation agenda is emphasised through all three cycles for the benefit of society and the public good.

## **The Third Cycle**

The National Postgraduate Committee strongly welcomed the introduction of the action line recognising the Third Cycle and welcomes the strong relationship to the first and second cycles.

Doctoral education must be considered in relation to the three Bologna cycles wholly but also to subsequent career stages; research is a core component of the doctorate but there is also a need to consider the development of transferable skills.

We recognise the importance of the link between all cycles and the importance for students of the ability to undertake the third cycle after finishing first or second cycle degrees. The National Postgraduate Committee recognises and welcomes the diversity and opportunity other forms of doctorate offer and will subsequently use the term Doctoral or PhD to represent all doctoral degrees by research or otherwise.

The great diversity of PhD programmes emerging from the changing labour market and employability issues within and external to academia provides a valuable opportunity for societal development and as a catalyst to develop other innovative doctoral programmes such as 'professional' doctorates. This diversity within the aim of mobility within Europe offers great scope to institutions to consider internationalisation within their programmes and institutional development.

The importance of the link between the three cycles extends most importantly to the social and student dimension of the third cycle. There needs to be a link in investment between the three cycles and targeted investment in the third cycle is clearly needed alongside and to support greater equity in challenging gender balance and financial disadvantage. The Second

Cycle cannot be left to market forces if the development of equity in gender and finance are to be addressed and the development of new forms of PhD with associated societal benefits are to be seen.

#### Higher Education Institutions' Roles.

HEIs are aware of their responsibility to ensure doctoral programmes are developed which are of high quality. The Salzburg Principles recognise the key to this ambition is achieving critical mass which requires institutions to develop strategies and policies to create a framework for such a mass.

Institutions must promote attractive career routes for doctoral candidates alongside non-academic sectors to encourage pathways within and outside academia and between academia and non-academic sectors of employment which should support societal and economic development and further strengthen the three cycles. Institutions should also provide information about the requirements of pursuing an academic career if it requires the attainment of further skills such as teaching requirement training. This information and information on doctoral programmes should be available through both preceding cycles.

Furthermore institutions must create attractive conditions to support research by using the European Researchers Charter and the Code of Conduct for the Recruitment of Researchers. The development of European Quality Assurance alongside such conditions to ensure attractive research needs to be balanced however by support for institutional staff using such processes and the increased pressures for students engaged in more levels of quality assurance. Institutions can also support new doctoral students by creating good quality effective PhD training.

Institutions creating critical mass should consider other factors that add to the value for the institution and support the student in the third cycle. The National Postgraduate Committee understands that different solutions may be appropriate for different contexts but these should seek to:

- avoid the isolation of the young researcher, from other disciplines, or from the larger peer group, or the larger scientific community.
- establish transparency of expectations, quality and assessment standards through supervision and viva assessment.
- create synergies regarding generic skills training (at institutional or at inter-institutional level)

The NPC notes the creation of successful, high quality graduate school structures in Europe. There are two variations in such structures but which both provide valuable institutional support for doctoral programmes and students:

- structures including master and doctoral candidates with crosscutting administrative support, or,
- structures including doctoral candidates only, around a research theme, possibly including several institutions.

#### Access and Admission

The increasingly competitive environment for institutions means it is essential to maintain flexibility in admissions to doctoral programmes. Further flexibility is required due to institutional autonomy itself with the variety in institutional missions and context. There are also initiatives such as Lifelong Learning that compound the need for variety and difference in entry requirements.

The National Postgraduate Committee believes that flexibility of entry requirements is important in addressing the issues of equity in gender and finance together with moving towards a learning outcome based approach for first, second and third level cycles. We support the Bologna commitment that the second cycle gives access, or a right to be considered for admission, to the third cycle but also note that it is important that there should be access possibilities in place for graduates of first cycle programmes if they have the necessary competencies and have met the learning outcomes to continue onto the third cycle.

The National Postgraduate Committee believes that doctoral students should be given the same rights to participation as students in other cycles and the social protection of those employed in respect to pension provision. Doctoral students are both students and also early career stage researchers. As such they should all have the benefits of access to the facilities of the HEI and to social welfare. The NPC strongly wishes to avoid a two-tier doctoral community of those who are funded receiving more benefits than those self-funding. All doctoral students should have access to secure funding for their studies and living costs, social and health assurance together with student benefits.

### Masters Degrees

Second cycle studies should equip students with the necessary competencies in order to undertake research activities and enrol in doctoral studies. These programmes should be learning outcome based, like all three cycles, and should not stipulate the required duration of the programme.

The range and diversity of Masters' degrees in the UK should be seen as an example of the variety of the learning outcome of the second cycle to positively develop career development and lifelong learning opportunities. As outlined earlier, this cycle should not be solely left to market intervention due to its role as part of the first and third cycles.

### Improving the Quality of Doctoral Programmes

All awards described as Doctorates should, regardless of type or form, be based on a core minimum level of process and outcomes, and there should be no doctorate without original research. Doctoral programmes should however cater for a variety of purposes.

Two of the goals of the Dublin Descriptors desired outcomes are that students "have demonstrated a systematic understanding of a field of study and mastery of the skills and methods of research associated with that field", and "can be expected to be able to promote, within academic and professional contexts, technological, social or cultural advancement in a knowledge based society". The research required of a doctorate can be either basic or applied. The NPC welcomes the diversity that professional doctorates offer as part of the application of research.

### Supervision, monitoring and assessment

Institutions must be encouraged and supported in the development and dissemination of good practices in the management of research degrees. Supervision, monitoring and

assessment are fundamentally important to the success of research and the student experience, as recognized in the Salzburg principles.

Supervision, monitoring and assessment arrangements should be based upon a transparent contractual framework of shared responsibilities between candidates, supervisors and the institution and where appropriate, partners. These guidelines are crucial to ensure the student is aware of what to expect from supervisor and to create structures to protect the student from maltreatment.

Students should have more than one supervisor to allow for more contact and engagement in research. They should also have the right to change supervisor without prejudice through restarting research and that they are able to access both male and female supervisors.

Supervision should be competent and supervisors should be trained. There should be mandatory training and performance review of supervisors and continuous professional skills development of academic staff. Supervision is so integral to the success of doctoral programmes that training should be the responsibility of the government or agency and the HEI. Supervisors should be supported and dialogue created to enable facilitation of situations arising as well as to ensure the workload of supervisors is appropriate.

The assessment of doctoral studies should be done by a team that are not those who supervise the doctoral student. The viva should be recorded or independently chaired to support fairness and transparency in the process and aid any complaints or appeals. Assessment by publication should not be a requirement for assessment and should not be required before the assessment.

#### Generic skills training

Generic skills training is an important part of the third cycle together with the first two cycle study programmes. It should be developed as part of an institutional support structure at doctoral level. The primary goal of institutional structures should be to raise awareness amongst doctoral candidates of the importance of acquiring and communicating such skills, improving their employment prospects. It should also recognize previously acquired skills and seek to highlight how to make them visible in the labour market.

#### Public responsibility

Doctoral candidates are early stage researchers who are vital to Europe's development, as stated in the Salzburg principles, and should have such rights together with academic structures and career perspectives to enable them to continue to post-doctoral research

If the number of researchers is to rise and be covered by appropriate salaries, the government should invest more into research and social infrastructure for researchers in order to make the UK more attractive within the European Research Area.

#### Funding

The tenth Salzburg principle is ensuring appropriate and sustainable funding of doctoral programmes and candidates. This is crucial given the crucial role of doctoral research within global research output, the formative stage of a research career in both academia and non-academic sectors of employment and that the attractiveness of a future career in research is determined largely at the doctoral stage.

Doctoral students require social security and a stable financial situation in order to be able to concentrate on their work and successfully complete it. Specific attention should be paid to visa and permit procedures for families of doctoral students.

It is important that funding for doctoral candidates should cover the full period of the doctoral programme and the full extent of doctoral training including related courses. It is important to indicate a certain timeframe for the duration to support students with non-traditional backgrounds and also to develop the possibilities for part-time doctoral studies and the possibilities to combine doctoral studies with another work. Funding should be sufficiently attractive to encourage suitably qualified candidates from lower income groups as well as sufficiently flexible to support the needs of part time doctoral students and others within the context of lifelong learning.

Funding is however a long-term investment that requires stable and unconditioned funding. A commitment must be recognized and followed by the HEI and government. The government should recognize the link between first and second cycles to the third cycle and research elements being present in all three cycles requiring investment in students from the first day of their studies.

## **Mobility**

Mobility is a key feature of Bologna. UK student mobility is affected by factors including language and student finance but there are also concerns on the mobility of staff and postdoctoral researchers.

Mobility issues particularly affect third cycle students who are not able to gain funding possibilities for research in other countries and research council funding is only available for domicile students in the UK.

Mobility is also a concern for addressing issues of widening participation and gender. All doctoral students should have access to secure funding for their studies and living costs, social and health assurance together with student benefits. The commitment to widening participation and promoting equality of opportunity might also present problems as high quality students are forced to exit in order to provide for themselves financially.

Alongside financial issues in widening participation there is also a need to address social and cultural barriers, particularly with access to doctoral studies. Training for supervisors to make them aware of biases and other perspectives should be mandatory. Students with disabilities should also receive support and individual assessment of needs by the HEI must be undertaken.

## **Diploma Supplement**

The National Postgraduate Committee welcomes the introduction of the Diploma Supplement as a tool for students to recognise their achievements and credits and as a tool to aid mobility. We believe however that employers and institutions need to liaise to recognise what achievement is measured including other holistic information, particularly for postgraduate second and third cycle degrees.

## **Funding the Three Cycles**

### Undergraduate Funding

There is a need to consider the three cycles funding relationship and not rely on the market to provide for second cycle programmes and limited financial support for third cycle programmes.

At undergraduate level there are opportunities for horizontal mobility with programmes provided by a student's home country allowing for part of to be studied in another. The awareness of this ability is limited and more UK students would benefit from the mobility experience. Associated funding issues such as childcare grants and other national benefits like social security benefits can be an obstacle as they cannot be paid abroad.

Other EU countries, such as Ireland, offer maintenance for those studying elsewhere and such scheme should not be administratively burdensome

([http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/student\\_financial\\_support.pdf?language=EN](http://www.education.ie/servlet/blobServlet/student_financial_support.pdf?language=EN)).

Alternatively, an ESIB supported idea is for the host country to finance the fees and living costs of students. This would be dependent on reciprocal agreements with other EU countries and issues such as social security benefits to be addressed.

### Masters Funding

As noted previously, leaving Masters fees to the market is undesirable due to their importance in the three cycles and as a link to both third cycle programmes but also to life-long learning and continuing professional development. The National Postgraduate Committee would recommend the extension of the undergraduate loans scheme to enable those with competencies to be able to complete Masters programmes.

There are also increased concerns on fees at Masters level and combined undergraduate and masters programmes to enable students to continue onto third cycle programmes. The EPSRC notes the potential impact of accumulating 'undergraduate debt in engineering which it estimates to be 20% higher than the average and substantially higher than the arts' presumably reflecting the length of programmes.

The common perception that most postgraduates come straight from their undergraduate courses is misleading. Most entrants to all types of postgraduate course are older than 22 and there are more first-year postgraduates above the age of 30 than below the age of 25. Part-time students tend to be older still, most being over 30. The over-30s constitute a substantial majority among part-time students starting every type of postgraduate course.

### Doctoral Programme Funding

The appropriate and sustainable funding of doctoral programmes is a principle of the Salzburg principles. It is integrally related to the earlier two cycles with growing student debt and increases in undergraduate fees placing a renewed emphasis on financial rewards as an attraction to careers in research. Ackers 2006 report on *Assessing the impact of the Roberts Review Enhanced Stipends and Salaries on Postgraduate and Postdoctoral Positions* noted that pay is a dimension shaping the relative attractiveness of academic research careers and is concerned primarily to encourage researchers to progress and remain within the UK academic sector (<http://www.rcuk.ac.uk/cmsweb/downloads/rcuk/researchcareers/summary-stipend.pdf>).

Furthermore as noted above, Doctoral students require social security and a stable financial situation in order to concentrate on their work and successfully complete it. Funding should be sufficiently attractive to encourage suitably qualified candidates from lower income groups as well as sufficiently flexible to support the needs of part time doctoral students and others within the context of lifelong learning.

*Research in the UK shows that students from groups at a disadvantage tend to enrol in lower level, shorter or more vocational courses, and closer to home. (Callender, 2003 and 2002; M Farr 'Home or Away'? 2001 quoted in Callender, 2003)*

A large proportion of postgraduates are self-funding and prospects for growth amongst home students depends on this number increasing. An extension of the students loans scheme to cover those not able to gain funding and Research Council Funding for students for EU study would seek to address the decline in domicile students.

## **Conclusion**

The Bologna Process has been successful and the UK government must continue to play a leading part in the successor development from the process. There must however be a greater dissemination of the process to and engagement with all stakeholders.

To facilitate the development of the process we would argue that the successor process establishes a permanent secretariat and widens its participation and transparency to make substantial developments on the knowledge economy and social development through Higher Education.

## **Recommendations**

- Agency led training co-ordination for supervisors and recognition of importance of supervision to successful completion of doctoral research.
- Increased awareness training and publicity for Higher Education Staff about the implications of Bologna.
- Institutional evaluation of Bologna Implementation, specifically on Diploma Supplements and Credit worth.
- Extension of scrutiny by Select Committee on lifelong learning and its concern with student funding, accreditation of prior learning, and student participation.

10.4 NPC / NUS Submission to Department of Communities and Local Government and Department for Education and Skills on Postgraduate Council Tax.



Postgraduate  
Council Tax



national union of students

This paper has been developed at the request of the Department for Education and Skills (DfES) for consideration by the Minister for Lifelong learning, further and Higher Education, Bill Rammell MP, and his colleagues in the Department for Local Government and Communities (DLGC). The case for change in this paper supports arguments put forward in a joint meeting of the National Postgraduate Committee (NPC), the National Union of Students (NUS) and Bill Rammell MP.

### The Status Quo

There are two problems:

- i. The differing arrangements and lack of clarity for “writing up postgraduates” and their council tax exemption status, and the financial burden this puts on students while trying to finish a thesis needed to complete the qualification; and
- ii. The council tax charges in the transition between either full-time FE courses and full-time HE courses or undergraduate and postgraduate full-time study: i.e. the students who find themselves eligible for council tax payment between the end of June (when they finish their undergraduate course/full-time FE course) and the beginning of October (when their PGCE, masters, or PhD starts/full-time HE course starts).

#### **i) The “writing up” students:**

The situation is very different in institutions around the country. There are a variety of local agreements in place. In some places the institution has played a positive role in this regard, but in others they abandon the students and leave them to the fate of the council officer that is processing the exemptions.

Places that have very positive policies include:

**Kings College London<sup>8</sup>:**

“If you are a postgraduate student writing up on a full-time basis, we will be able to provide you with an exemption certificate covering your period of study and the period that you are registered as writing up. When you submit your council tax exemption certificate to your Local Authority, you should enclose a letter from your supervisor that confirms your full time status.”

**Kent:**

Postgraduate research students who are writing up can claim exemption for 12 months from their completion date.

**Sheffield<sup>9</sup>:**

“PhD students in their writing up year need to collect a special form from SSiD which requires their supervisor's signature, before they can be issued with a Council Tax Exemption letter.”

**Imperial<sup>10</sup>:**

“MPhil/PhD students are permitted to write up their thesis in College for six months immediately following the end of their registration. This allows you to have access to the library and College facilities, without paying any fees. You will need to complete an Application for Writing Up Status. Please note, the application for Writing Up will not be processed until an Examination Entry has been submitted. The Writing Up period cannot be extended beyond six months, but students may continue to write up away from College for the life of the Examination Entry.”

**Edinburgh<sup>11</sup>:**

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[http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/admin/acareg/funding/financialhelp/council\\_tax.html](http://www.kcl.ac.uk/about/structure/admin/acareg/funding/financialhelp/council_tax.html)

<sup>9</sup> <http://www.shef.ac.uk/ssid/faq/tax.html>

<sup>10</sup>

<http://www3.imperial.ac.uk/registry/studentrecords/informationforresearchstudents>

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.postgrad.ed.ac.uk/RESCODE/DEFAULT.HTM> & <http://www.tla.ed.ac.uk/resources/dos/IV-Ch3.pdf>

“PhD students who are writing up can be classed as a ‘student’ until the end of their fourth year of study. M.Phil and M.Lit students can be classed as a ‘student’ up to the end of their third year of study.”

**Leeds**<sup>12</sup>:

Students who have been classed as full time for the duration of their postgraduate course are entitled to one year’s council tax exemption in their ‘writing up’ period. “If you are an International ‘writing up’ student and live in a property where the Council Tax is payable to Leeds City Council then you are treated by the council as a full-time student for Council Tax purposes for the whole period you are registered with the University, including your ‘writing up’ period. To claim this exemption you should obtain a student certificate.”

Places that have less helpful policies include:

**Cardiff**<sup>13</sup>:

Postgraduate students in the writing-up stage are not eligible to receive an exemption certificate.

**Royal College, University of London**<sup>14</sup>:

“Postgraduate Research students on their writing-up years will be issued a standard certifying letter and it will be up to the local Council to decide on the student's eligibility.”

**Goldsmiths**<sup>15</sup>:

“If you are Writing Up your thesis, you will not be exempt from paying council tax.”

**York**<sup>16</sup>:

“Students who have exceeded the normal period of full-time registration are not counted as registered students. Such students are therefore not exempt from Council Tax, and the Graduate Schools Office cannot produce exemption letters or certificates for them.”

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<sup>12</sup> [http://www.luuonline.com/help/council\\_tax.html](http://www.luuonline.com/help/council_tax.html)

<sup>13</sup> <http://www.cardiff.ac.uk/for/prospective/inter/european/10317.dld>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.rhul.ac.uk/Registry/RLAC/FAQs.html>

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.goldsmiths.ac.uk/registry/newstudent-faqs.php>

<sup>16</sup> <http://www.york.ac.uk/admin/gso/fees.htm>

**Glamorgan**<sup>17</sup>:

“Students who are ‘writing up’ are liable for council tax if they are not registered as full time students at their institution even if they use and study full time within their department. However, some Local Authorities will recognise that a ‘writing up’ student is studying full time if their supervisor provides a letter of support.”

And there are places that seem to charge for “writing up” status which may or may not enable them to get the exemption certificate:

**Birmingham**<sup>18</sup>:

“Once you have completed your formal period of registration you will be required to pay a continuation fee in each academic session until such time as your thesis is submitted. The continuation fee for the 2005–06 academic session will be £125, and this will be reviewed for subsequent years. There will be no refund if you submit your thesis during the course of the academic session, as many of the costs associated with the examination of a thesis will already have been incurred, and some will continue throughout the examination period. Students who transfer to writing-up status part way through the academic session will be charged a pro-rata continuation fee for that session only. If a student proceeds to a further academic session, they will be required to pay the full continuation fee, which is currently £125. An exemption certificate is not produced for research students in writing-up status who pay only a continuation fee, as they are not normally eligible for exemption from council tax.”

**Oxford**<sup>19</sup>:

“Once a graduate student has met the fee for their course of study and is, therefore, beyond fee liability they can ask for Writing Up Status. The College offers Writing Up Status to students who intend to remain in or near Oxford and would like to continue to use College facilities. For D.Phil. students fee liability ends after nine

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<sup>17</sup> <http://glamlife.glam.ac.uk/usefulinfo/683>

<sup>18</sup> [www.studserv.bham.ac.uk/studrecspgr/PeriodsofStudy/WritingUp.htm](http://www.studserv.bham.ac.uk/studrecspgr/PeriodsofStudy/WritingUp.htm)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.univ.ox.ac.uk/collegelife/info/finances.html>

terms. Fee liability for various Masters' degrees may end after the third or sixth term. The current charge for Writing Up Status is the same as the Living Out facility charge: £52.32 per term. This charge ensures that students continue to have a pigeon-hole (if they wish) and allows them to use all other facilities of the College (WCR, Library, Computing facilities, meals in Hall, use of Laundry, etc.), subject to further charges where relevant, and receive the appropriate student subsidies and administrative support."

**Bath**<sup>20</sup>:

"Most full-time research students will be funded for three years, although the regulations allow up to four years for the completion of a PhD thesis. Once you have completed the minimum period of study required for your particular degree, and provided you have completed the necessary amount of work, you are eligible for transfer to either the 'Administration' Fee, or to the 'Continuation' Fee, both of which you may hear referred to as 'writing-up'. The 'Administration' fee in 2005-6 is £75, and the 'Continuation' Fee is £474, payable on a pro-rata basis every six months. For the 'Administration' Fee, you are entitled to receive neither supervision nor access to the Library; for the 'Continuation' Fee you may receive minimal supervision plus continued access to the Library."

Students' unions do work on this issue all the time: the Union of UEA Students has recently successfully lobbied their local authority to accept postgraduates as eligible for the exemption. Although this is a local victory, members of the NPC and NUS around the country have not always been so successful, which makes the picture so unclear and the lottery unjust.

The issues involved are most apparent in London, where students at one institution do not live in one local authority area, but are often spread across many different authorities. This makes the situation starker and

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<sup>20</sup> <http://www.bath.ac.uk/grad-office/publications/handbook/pdf/research.pdf>

means that there are students at the same institution living under different rules. At Queen Mary, University of London they pursued a case in the courts on behalf of a student. They were successful, with the court agreeing that in the example they were presented with the person was classified as a student and, therefore, should be granted an exemption certificate that the local authority should accept. This was a great success and students' unions in other areas of the country have talked about following suit, but litigation is an expensive business which limits the options.

The issue affects students in such a dramatic way and makes them feel a real sense of injustice. This is best illustrated in the words of a student who has contacted us to help sort out their situation. They say:

**"I am no longer funded by my department (funding was 50% departmental and 50% UoN) but I still have a considerable amount of lab work to do before I will be able to start writing up. My supervisor has quite clearly discouraged me from finding a job, which means I now have no income. We are not eligible to sign on (which is what she has told me to do) because we are not available for work, and so if we do it is actually benefit fraud. I have done quite a bit of investigation, but it seems that because I don't have to support any children or dependents and because in effect not working is my "choice" there is no help available.**

**My council tax will be approximately £110 per month (yearly bill paid over ten months). Of course I have saved money to cover my cost of living for a few months but only enough to cover rent/ food/ bills. As far as I can work out - it is my lack of student status that makes me eligible to pay council tax.**

**What I can't understand is that the university relies on its research status, and yet isn't prepared to support the final PhD year students in order to help them focus on their**

**research. I don't know a single person who has finished their research within 3 years, and neither are we strongly encouraged to do so, but the additional worry of financial problems doesn't help students to focus on doing good research for publication. All we are asking for is the University to maintain our registration for the fourth year of PhD study - that is all it takes for us to remain on the lists of registered students that are sent to the council. Even if we have to pay a small administration fee I really don't see the problem to the University, for the big difference it will make to our situation."**

This experience is not isolated; students in this situation are often pressured to continue their writing up full time with no prospect of work or support from the institution. A student from Cardiff University who contacted us said:

**"Obviously, it is very difficult (/impossible) for a full time PhD student entering a writing up stage to seek another job at the same time. Any salary or income stops at the end of the 3rd year and that corresponds to the time when we are supposed to pay the council tax. Most of us have absolutely no other income, very few savings (even student loans to pay back) and still have to pay the council tax or a part of it."**

**ii) The transition between study:**

Those between the end of one course and the start of a new one (e.g., the transition from an undergraduate degree to a PGCE) are liable for council tax on their property for this period. However, the national picture is very ambiguous. Firstly, students do not expect the charge as the transition seems no different from the transition between the years of an undergraduate degree, when they are exempt. In addition some local authorities have insufficient knowledge, information, or collection arrangements to charge the student, and others who levy the charge finally do so when the person has become a student again. The charge at this time is difficult to meet, can leave students in more debt, comes with

a high opportunity cost, or means lengthy form filling to claim the council tax benefit that they are probably entitled to but know little about. The transition period is normally about three months, which could see students charged this proportion of an annual council tax bill. In an area where the council tax is £1000, with the single person reduction this would amount to £187.50 - no small fee in the longest term of the year in the run up to the festive holidays.

On a wider basis, there is a misconception that graduates will walk straight into jobs on completion of their course – which is very unlikely, and the immediate burden of council tax at this time can be prohibitive to decisions on future careers and long term location decisions.

#### **The Case for Change**

On the first issue of council tax for “writing up” postgraduate students, we seek an amendment to the regulations as follows:

##### **To grant to those yet to complete their:**

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

This will improve the financial situation, in particular the debt levels, of students in their writing up stage – who, as indicated above, are sometimes pressured by supervisors into this being a full-time commitment. Most importantly for the Government, HEIs and the students involved, this will increase the number of theses that get completed and submitted. There is currently a national problem surrounding the number of students who finish the writing up stage of their PhDs<sup>21</sup>, and the student movement believes that one of the contributing factors is that some postgraduates need to work more hours in order to pay the

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<sup>21</sup> Miranda Irving (2006) *Unfinished business*, Education Guardian: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,,1822428,00.html>

additional burden of council tax. If this barrier can be removed, completion rates could be improved, giving all parties much higher returns for their investment in postgraduate education.

This policy has very small cost implications, being a tiny proportion of the student council tax bill, and some local authorities accept the situation already. It will also remove from the sector the current costs associated with advice and support of postgraduate students on this issue, with local authorities chasing students who do not have the money every year, and the cost of lobbying or legal challenges that continually arise to seek justice for these students. Unnecessary friction between students (and their students' unions) and local authorities should also be avoided at all costs, because together they are natural partners to deal with issues of community cohesion, the retention of local skills, and dealing with anti-social behaviour issues in the local area.

On the second issue of those in the transition stage, we ask that:

**Students who have exemption certificates for two adjacent periods of study, e.g., 2005-6 and 2006-7, will be treated as continuous, and any charge for time when 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.**

The transition situation is exacerbated for those moving from an HE degree to postgraduate study because those students receive a reduced student-loan payment for the last term of their final year, which reduces considerably the student's ability to pay any council tax charges.

The case for change in this instance, other than that the student will no longer be faced with costs they can little afford at really inopportune moments, is that it will also remove a high level of cost to the local authority.

The charging, and chasing, of people for relatively small levels of revenue when the issue is complex, (and the student is normally eligible for council tax benefit – which has to be applied retrospectively and, again, for the amount of money involved is an expensive process), is burdensome on the local authority. The removal of this anomaly will have no impact on the public purse, as such a high proportion of these students are eligible for council tax benefit, and it will be administratively cheaper and easier to have their contribution paid through the central government grant that reimburses local authorities for student exemptions.

NUS Scotland, a politically autonomous region of the National Union of Students, is campaigning in their Education Manifesto<sup>22</sup> as part of the Scottish Parliament Elections for council tax breaks for graduates, arguing that:

**Astonishingly students moving from HNC to HND are liable to pay council tax during the summer break in between courses. The same situation applies to undergraduates entering postgraduate study including teaching, nursing and other vocational based courses. On top of this, graduates rarely walk into immediate graduate employment, yet are expected to pay council tax from the date of their graduation ceremony. A four month council tax grace period would ease the transition between the education system and the work place.**

**The average debt that a Scottish student graduates with is in excess of £17,000. It is a great misconception that graduates walk straight into suitable paid employment. Many take six months to find the first step onto their chosen career path, and some students considerably longer than that.**

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<sup>22</sup> <http://resource.nusonline.co.uk/media/resource/manifesto%2020071.pdf>

**After studying for several years and graduating with hugely significant sums of debt, students should have the financial freedom to choose the type and location of the employment they take up. Many find themselves instantly pressured to take the first job available to them, regardless of its relationship to a degree studied, just to pay the bills. Situations like this are exacerbated by instant liability to pay council tax, forcing students to find anything between £40 and £100 extra a month on the same or similar income as they had pre-graduation. NUS Scotland calls on the new Scottish Executive to introduce a four month council tax grace period for all graduates and independent school and college leavers. NUS Scotland thoroughly believes that such a move would relieve some of the burden of debt, promote transition into further learning, and provide students with the opportunity to pursue the choices and options rightly due to them.**

#### **The Recommendations**

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

- ◆ PhD - council tax exemption 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 exemption for a further year after their one year course.

Only a small proportion of students ever complete their research and submit within three years (for a full time PhD), therefore action must be taken to aid eventual completion rates. The most common reason given by students for the non-completion of their thesis or dissertation is financial pressures (Carney, 2002, Delayed Post Graduate Completion) to which the cost of council tax contributes. Looking at continued exemption for a short period of time after the funded period is important and part of

the solution because we know that if a PhD is not written up quickly, the chance that it will be completed becomes proportionately lower,

- ◆ Students who have exemption certificates for two adjacent periods of study, e.g. 2005-6 and 2006-7, should be treated as continuous, and any charge for time where the student is deemed to have not had exempt status should be cleared, even if the student has moved local authorities for the purpose of continuing study; or
- ◆ A four month council tax break should be given for graduates.

Astonishingly, students moving from HNC to HND are liable to pay council tax during the summer break in between courses. The same situation applies to undergraduates entering postgraduate study, including teaching, nursing and other vocational-based courses. Additionally, graduates rarely walk into immediate graduate employment, yet are expected to pay council tax from the date of their graduation ceremony.

A four-month council tax grace period would ease the transition between the education system and the work place. This recommendation is also for pragmatic reasons, because the time that the charge is levied is most likely to be while the student is in receipt of a student loan or their postgraduate funding arrangement, so they find the charge a significant burden. The earning potential for most students through this period is incredibly low, and they would most likely be eligible for Council Tax Benefit, and this adds expensive procedure and administrative costs to the student, local authority and benefits agency. This anomaly should be removed so that 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 would appear that Lyons will not seek to change that, but there are some irregularities, especially for postgraduates, that should be cleared up. Currently there

is a lottery between, and sometimes within, institutions about whether research and teaching postgraduate students writing up their thesis or dissertation are council tax exempt, and whether there are charges for students for the small period of transition time in-between courses.

We believe this change would meet the needs of our members and aid 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.

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## **Appendices**

### Appendix 1: Students' Union Policy

The policy below is the position taken by many constituent members of both NUS and NPC, including the NPC itself:

#### **Students and Council Tax**

This Union Notes:

1. Local government elections for the London Boroughs are due to take place in May 2006.
2. Currently local government in Great Britain is financed by a combination of locally set Council Tax, centrally set business rates, grants from central government, local fines and other streams. (Hale, Rita and Associates "Who pays for local services? The balance of funding between government and councils" (Local Government Association, 2005), copy at <http://www.lga.gov.uk/Publication.asp?lsection=0&id=SX1135-A781FC66> accessed 2005-11-22)
3. Council Tax raises approximately 26% of local government income but is one of the few streams a local council can vary. Consequently, an increase in spending often requires a proportionally greater increase in council tax.
4. In recent years, the level of Council Tax has received much media attention and a high level of protest. Very recently, the Local Government Association of England and Wales predicted that Council Tax could rise by as much as £100 a year. (*Metro* November 22, 2005, page 2 columns 3-4)
5. Full-time students are exempt from paying Council Tax until they have "completed their course." (Part 2 of Schedule 1 to the Council Tax (Discount Disregards) Order 1992 (SI 1992 No 548) ([http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1992/Uksi\\_19920548\\_en\\_2.htm](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1992/Uksi_19920548_en_2.htm)), as amended by the Council Tax (Discount Disregards) Amendment Order 1996 (SI 1996 No 636) ([http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1996/Uksi\\_19960636\\_en\\_1.htm](http://www.opsi.gov.uk/si/si1996/Uksi_19960636_en_1.htm)),

defines a full time student as:

"A person is to be regarded as undertaking a full time course of education on a particular day if -

- a. on the day he is enrolled for the purpose of attending such a course with a prescribed educational establishment within Part I of Schedule 2 to this Order, and
  - b. the day falls within the period beginning with the day on which he begins the course and ending with the day on which he ceases to undertake it, and a person is to be regarded as ceasing to undertake a course of education for the purpose of this paragraph if he has completed it, abandoned it or is no longer permitted by the educational establishment to attend it."
6. There is ambiguity over what exactly constitutes "completed their course" for research students in the writing up and beyond phase.
  7. Currently the Council Tax is one of the most controversial charges of all and there are many calls for it to be amended or scrapped. (E.g. IsItFair – The Campaign for the Reform of Council Tax at <http://www.isitfair.co.uk/>)
  8. One of the most common proposed alternatives is to have a Local Income Tax and some political parties have taken this up.
  9. The exemption for students is not explicitly retained in some proposals for local government taxation reform.
  10. The current weekly threshold for starting to pay income tax for most student jobs (approximately Tax Codes 471-500) is between £90 and £95. (Tables A – Pay Adjustment Tables (Inland Revenue, 1993), Week 1 (Apr 6 – Apr 12))
  11. Due to the way in which Free Pay works and the juxtaposition of the tax year and university vacation dates, the effective threshold is even lower for those only working during vacations.

This Union Believes:

1. Students are presently financially overburdened and it would be monumentally unfair to give them the additional burden of local government taxation.

2. If the Council Tax is to be replaced, the alternative must include an explicit continuation of the student exemption.
3. The definition of a full-time student should be modified to explicitly incorporate research students in the writing up phase.

#### This Union Resolves

1. To lobby and campaign for the student exemption to be retained at all times, but to especially do this when there is high profile public debate on the future course of local government finance.
2. To write to relevant bodies and individuals, including but not limited to, the major political parties, the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister and any successor holding the Local Government portfolio, the Local Government Association, the Greater London Assembly, the Mayor of London and the local MP, setting out the Union's position and concern.
3. To encourage a high level of registration and voting by students in the forthcoming local government elections to show that the student vote cannot be ignored.

## Appendix 2: National Union of Students' Response to the Lyons Inquiry

In a recent meeting with members of NUS and the student movement, a number of issues were raised. The point was made – in line with previous submissions – that:

*"Full-time students are exempt from Council Tax (CT) for a simple reason: they are, in the main, ineligible for social security benefits. Whereas those who are liable for CT can claim CT Benefit if they are on a low income, all but a small number of students would be unable to do so.*

*"It would clearly be unjust to deny those who cannot pay CT a means of applying for state support, so either students must be exempt or have some access to CT Benefit. But if students were liable for CT and able to apply for CT Benefit this would involve them doing so en masse each year to local authorities, who would then have to process each claim, thus creating an enormous administrative headache for a broadly similar result, given that most students do not have substantial earnings whilst they study."*

**We therefore see no need for this situation to change as it is the most cost effective and socially just model.**

It was also highlighted that the current deadline for calculating the number of students in an area leaves too many students unaccounted for, adds an £82.5m burden to local authorities, and adds up to £19 a year to the council tax bill of students' neighbours (see Donald MacLeod and agencies (2006) *University towns 'pay higher council tax'*:

<http://education.guardian.co.uk/higher/news/story/0,,1735987,00.html>).

These add to community tensions and means that local services are starved of cash to cater for students and their neighbours.

**We call on the commission to change the date from the 21<sup>st</sup> October each year to later months, ideally around March and April**

**which would plug this funding gap, give the opportunity for investment in the local area or council tax remission, and would make the council tax burden fairer for local communities.**

The final issue with student council tax concerns the current postcode lottery for postgraduates who are writing up – currently the picture is very different from institution to institution and sometimes even within departments from supervisor to supervisor. Some institutions give postgraduates the council tax exemption certificate, whilst others don't. This obviously leaves an unfair and unclear situation which needs to be cleared up. There is currently a national problem surrounding the number of students who finish the writing up stage of their PhDs (see Miranda Irving (2006) *Unfinished business*, Education Guardian: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,,1822428,00.html>), and the student movement believes that one of the contributing factors is that some postgraduates need to work more hours in order to pay the additional burden of council tax.

**We therefore call for national clarity on this issue and for all postgraduates to be exempt for a year of writing up, in line with the current arrangements for other full time students.**

## Appendix 3: National Postgraduate Committee's Response to the Lyons Inquiry

The National Postgraduate Committee is very pleased to be able to take this opportunity to respond to The Lyons Inquiry on the reform of Council Tax. Postgraduate students and researchers are both receiving training and contributing to the knowledge base and are actively involved in the promotion of learning and the development of the knowledge economy. Supporting students who are on low incomes and ineligible for social security benefits is just and would encourage their successful completion of their study and engagement into the knowledge economy.

The National Postgraduate Committee is formed from the representative of postgraduates from Students Associations at universities and other institutions. It represents postgraduates' interests both through these Associations and through the other educational and professional bodies with which it has links.

The National Postgraduate Committee feels strongly that any change to Council Tax must retain Full-Time students exemption from Council Tax as students are, overwhelmingly, ineligible for social security benefits. We also feel that if students were liable for Council Tax and subsequently able to access Council Tax Benefit there would be significant administrative burdens on local authorities processing each claim and that there would most likely be a large number of successful claimants as most students do not have substantial earnings.

We also note the changes to Council tax, guaranteeing students exemption while living with non-students. This is very important for Postgraduate Students who are likely to share accommodation with other older or professional people and should remain.

We are however concerned by the continuation period where individuals may be deemed to no longer qualify for exemptions as students despite

the fact they are working on their research leading up to submission. This is particularly unfair as a small proportion of students ever complete their research and submit within three years (full time). Again the status of students in their writing up period needs to be clarified. This is a very difficult and pressured time for doctoral students. If funding has ceased and they are engaged in seeking employment and writing up their research then the last thing needed is further financial disbenefit. Clearly this will have a knock-on effect on completion rates as students struggle to manage. Miranda Irving notes that HEFCE data shows a third of full time doctoral students and two thirds of part time doctoral students do not complete their degree in seven years (July 18 2006). It is important that these students do not suffer from financial hardship in attempting to complete their studies as they will be of value to the economy through training and advancement in the knowledge economy.

References:

Irving, Miranda. "Unfinished Business." GuardianUnlimited 18 Jul. 2006, Online. Available:  
<http://education.guardian.co.uk/egweekly/story/0,,1822428,00.html>. 18 July. 2006.

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