

# NORFOLK 'N' GOOD

## NATIONAL POSTGRADUATE COMMITTEE

### ANNUAL CONFERENCE

2nd - 5th of September 1999 at the University of East Anglia

Report from Danny Chrastina, our man in the bar with a bottle of Budvar and a book about why French philosophy is bobbins.

*"If there's one thing that the NPC can't organise, it's anything."*

*"People of Norfolk do different."*

The conference experience began at around 10:00am on Thursday morning, when with the aid of G.P.S. navigation David found your correspondent's house. With the further assistance of several satellites (which could tell us exactly where we were, but didn't know where everything else was) the delegates made it to the University of East Anglia, on the western outskirts of Norwich, at exactly 1:00pm. However, a certain amount of rather inefficient wandering around was necessary so by the time we'd got back to the Elizabeth Fry building (where most of the proceedings were to proceed) we had missed the welcome and introduction from Jeremy Hoad (General Secretary of NPC) and Professor Nick Harris (of the QAA for HE) was already well into his talk on maintaining decent high-quality supplies of opiates and dope to students.

After a few moments it became clear that Nick was merely using narcotics as an example: firstly that some of the drugs produced from opium poppies are more legal than others, and secondly that no-one who grows dope should be trusted as to their opinion of it. This apparently relates to **Postgraduate Qualifications**.

One current problem is that the work required to get something like a master's degree can vary greatly.<sup>1</sup> Another problem is that some institutions<sup>2</sup> give

"HE has shot  
itself firmly in the  
foot"

master's degrees to students when their theses don't quite reach the level required for a doctorate: perhaps qualifications ought to positively reflect a level of achievement rather than be handed out as consolation prizes.

Various questions about the relative merits of PhD qualifications in the sciences versus the arts, or in the UK versus the US were raised, rhetorically. The issue of what level of training should be aimed at master's or PhD students was also raised: this is relevant seeing as there may be about three kinds of master's level at the moment,<sup>3</sup> and then there's the issue of whether this sort of training is for post-graduates or potential professionals, or something.

There is strong "qualification inflation" in force<sup>4</sup> but I think at this stage your correspondent was still wondering if the distinction between achievement, training and ability was being made or should be implied.

After this, there were two parallel sessions: your correspondents decided to attend **Decision-making and choice in postgraduate research: the student's part** by Dr. Pat Cryer but the other one was **A User's Guide to the NPC Annual General**

<sup>1</sup> I could facetiously point out that getting the same qualification without doing as much work as everyone else may well be a sign of greater intelligence.

<sup>2</sup> Ours, for example. It was decided at a recent BoGS that we thought it would be unfair to let someone who'd put in a lot of work but hadn't reached PhD level leave empty handed, and in many cases it

is traditional for PhD students to register for a master's degree at first which then gets upgraded if the first year goes okay.

<sup>3</sup> One year postgraduate courses, two year courses, and the fourth year of an undergraduate degree: refer to Professor *Martin* Harris, for he is the true Harris of the eponymous report.

<sup>4</sup> In common with all university education, and indeed all education these days.

**Meeting** given by Dr. Martin Gough.<sup>5</sup> This means we now know exactly how to get ourselves PhDs and since it's all competitive in the job market we're not going to share it.<sup>6</sup>

Well, in summary ending up with a storming thesis is about these five things (at least two of which she's pinched without referencing)<sup>7</sup>:

1. Finding solutions to research problems.
2. 10% inspiration and 90% perspiration.
3. Learning more and more about less until you ultimately know everything about nothing.
4. A piece of research that a full-time, well balanced and competent [PhD] student, properly supervised and supported, can complete in three years.<sup>8</sup>
5. Satisfying examiners.

Two things she mentioned are that the candidate should write a thesis as a barrister rather than a journalist: you are, after all, trying to make a case. Also, the best evidence for being able to do all those things that are fashionable with human resources departments these days is apparently a set of photographs.<sup>9</sup> When you have worked out what you've done at the end of your PhD, write your thesis as if you meant it like that all along.

After refreshments there was **A Forum on Complaints and Appeals: The QAA Code and the Future** including Jeremy, Peter Williams (QAA for HE) and Chris Fabby<sup>10</sup> from the NUS.

Since recent policy changes in undergraduate funding, students can now consider themselves "consumers" and as such ought to expect a level of service from their institution.<sup>11</sup> This is not directly relevant to postgraduates, since research council support only seems to be increasing, but a significant proportion of postgraduates do pay their

own fees<sup>12</sup> and always have done, so it is worth bearing in mind. Whilst the QAA cannot force institutions to do anything or change the law, this doesn't mean it has no power.<sup>13,14</sup>

Appeals and complaints are quite distinct from each other: many institutions apparently believe that they already have complaints procedures when what they actually have are appeals procedures. *Appeals* relate to academic decisions, such as examination results or whether your PhD is any good; *complaints* relate to everything else, such as the poor supervision or lack of office space that lead you PhD to not be any good.

The forum strongly suggests replacing the *visitor system*<sup>15</sup> that operates in many older universities with a national independent ombudsman.<sup>16,17</sup>

To persuade an institution to adopt a complaints procedure, it is a good idea to accentuate the positive aspects. For example, since students are now apparently entitled to a level of service it is not unreasonable for them to consider, as a last resort, suing their institution. Obviously this is tedious for the institution (and also very much so for the student) and is bad publicity.<sup>18</sup>

Decent support systems in an institution should mean that it never comes to this. Progress reports and feedback should highlight problems before they develop into full-blown complaints, meaning that they can be resolved informally. In the worst case, progress reports can be used as evidence if things do go bad.<sup>19</sup>

"There are few bonuses in academic life but having fun is one of them"

<sup>5</sup> !

<sup>6</sup> Actually, this was interesting because it was the sort of talk that was aimed at PhD research students in general, rather than conference delegates. Either we just tell as many people what she said, or we book someone else to come here and say it.

<sup>7</sup> What was that about originality?

<sup>8</sup> Hahahahaha! Well, refer to Ewan Gillon's talk.

<sup>9</sup> Here's a picture of me using some equipment... here's a picture of me giving a seminar... here's a picture of me having an idea... and this is one of the Spanish Inquisition, hiding being the coal shed.

<sup>10</sup> Wearing a baseball cap, I'm afraid.

<sup>11</sup> This is not due to the "payment of tuition fees" issue particularly because this is only supposed to apply to students who have parents who can afford to pay them. The main problem with undergraduate funding is the switch from *grants* to *loans*.

<sup>12</sup> And Warwick, for one, is increasing the fees for self-funded home/EU students taking master's courses.

<sup>13</sup> Only the government can make universities change their statutes, but it is a serious process. TQA can lead to a carrot-and-stick approach by withdrawing funding to underachieving institutions. See note 18.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.niss.ac.uk/education/qaa/pub98/tvuauditrep.htm>

<sup>15</sup> Traditionally the visitor is someone like Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth the Second but the task tends to be delegated to a QC, on the grounds that a good legal mind is helpful. The problem with the visitor system is that they are expensive, busy and of variable quality. The national system is inefficient since the visitor's delegate may be well out of touch with the institution in question.

<sup>16</sup> Obviously one ombudsman would not be able to cope with the torrent of complaints that would arise once students were aware they had someone to complain to (solicitors have something like this already) so he or she would have to delegate to someone. The national system is better because there are less likely to be vested interests. Please reassure me that I'm being facetious.

<sup>17</sup> Chris Fabby kept referring to a national "ombudsperson" and I doff my baseball cap to his political correctness.

<sup>18</sup> Incidentally, I've just looked up *blackmail* in the dictionary. The NUS has been known to name and shame but it is not always "reliably" informed. This, as you can imagine, can be very destructive.

And that was it for the day: dinner was functional but confusing and was followed by drinks in the Sainsbury's Centre<sup>20</sup> and a wander through their art collection. Oddly, many people spent a significant amount of time gazing down into open-plan offices.

Some mild networking took place but at 8:00pm we were kicked out. At this point herd behaviour took us to the student bars and we discovered that the UEA GSA runs its own.<sup>21</sup> Your correspondent found himself holding forth on various diverse subjects<sup>22</sup> and told anyone who would listen how great things were for postgraduates at Warwick.

Friday's first session concerned **Postgraduate Representation & Sabbatical positions** and was hosted by John Woodward and Rachel Hall from the Universities of Leeds and Oxford respectively.<sup>23</sup> Here are 9 reasons why having a postgraduate sabbatical officer is a good idea:<sup>24</sup>

1. Administration
2. Community
3. Responsiveness
4. An indication of priorities
5. Continuity
6. Consistency
7. Improved Provision
8. Screening Mechanism
9. Information Point

Not only does the university need to be convinced of the need for a postgraduate sabbatical, so do the students. The university may be easy to win over: they could see the existence of a postgraduate sabbatical as helpful in competition with other universities.<sup>25</sup> However, sometimes the undergrads or even the postgrads will not accept the necessity of the position.<sup>26,27</sup>

Two issues which must be addressed at this point: firstly, if someone is elected to the post but then is late in submitting their thesis are they allowed to take the post or not? Secondly, should a

postgraduate sabbatical be paid more than an undergraduate one? Leeds think so: the university funds the position at a research salary of £17,000<sup>28</sup> while the other sabbaticals only get £10,500. No wonder their union would rather have the money for itself.<sup>29</sup>

The next session concerned **Developing Postgraduates' Teaching Skills** and was given by Ruth Goodall from UEA. I've noted a few things about why postgraduates think teaching is worth doing<sup>30</sup> and a few more things about why, from the institution's point of view, getting postgraduates to teach is a good thing.<sup>31</sup> The teaching that postgraduates do seems to vary from giving actual lectures to taking small supervisions/tutorials or examples classes.

After at least two hours of sessions, then, we got to have our morning tea-break.<sup>32</sup> The session after this concerned **Communicating effectively with external audiences** which basically meant web design,<sup>33</sup> and was given by Rosemary Stamp (the National Director of Education Marketing; Riley) while someone else (presumably Caroline Scott of Riley Norwich, it says here) just sat there.

"A physicist? Oh, you're quite earthy"

Apparently, the "postgraduate audience is highly discerning" which may explain our attitude to this session.<sup>34</sup>

In response to a comment about "modes of learning delivery" in this context, I strongly suggest the reader go to the QAA's special review of Thames Valley University<sup>14</sup> and search within it for the words *New Learning Environment*. However, if we ignore web-based learning and e-commerce which may well be doomed in their own ways then the web

<sup>19</sup> For example, if a student has indicated all the way through that there is a problem with supervision but nothing was ever done, this is grounds for complaint.

<sup>20</sup> The aircraft hanger which is obviously near where the UEA keeps its missiles, and maybe a submarine.

<sup>21</sup> Sadly, your correspondent did not notice the bottles of Budvar behind the bar until he'd already had a pint of Kronenbourg.

<sup>22</sup> Maybe I'm only over-compensating for being a physicist.

<sup>23</sup> There was a parallel session on equal opportunities, but I daren't make a joke about it.

<sup>24</sup> Although I neglected to note what some of them meant.

<sup>25</sup> One postgraduate is worth six undergraduates, apparently.

<sup>26</sup> At Leeds, for example, the university supports the position (and pays for it) but the students' union does not.

<sup>27</sup> You could try forcing quoracy at an AGM...

<sup>28</sup> There was some debate about whether anyone should only be in it for the money.

<sup>29</sup> I've got "Leeds Union Exec are pillocks" written down for some reason.

<sup>30</sup> Money, increased knowledge of subject, experience, confidence, getting to work closely with experienced staff members, increased employability and keeping one's feet on the ground.

<sup>31</sup> To undergraduates, postgraduates are more approachable than staff. They also identify more closely with being taught and remember what it was like and may have a simpler, closer viewpoint.

<sup>32</sup> In case this document makes it out of this institution, I won't tell you what was said to me at this point, who it was said by, or who it was about. Nevertheless, I'd like to point out that *something* was said. I don't know why I need to note this. Indulge me.

<sup>33</sup> At which point it occurred to me that if a net is holes tied together with string, then the internet is merely ignorance joined by wires.

<sup>34</sup> I wasn't the only sad computer spod to notice her mistake when she was talking about the way "the web was developed in the States." As any fule kno, the *internet* was developed in the States but the *World Wide Web* (which uses the internet to transmit information) was developed at CERN, the European particle physics facility. This is like not knowing the difference between roads and traffic. Okay, rant over.

is useful for finding information, which is what it was for anyway.

To illustrate examples of good and bad ways of doing web sites, various examples were brought before us.<sup>35</sup> Motherwell<sup>36</sup> and Warwick<sup>37</sup> were praised for having information available only a click or two away, and having on-line prospectuses and application forms.<sup>38</sup> Cambridge<sup>39</sup> was slated because its site looks like a dull list of administrivia rather than an attempt at promotion and the London Business School<sup>40</sup> looked great but was apparently frustrating once you'd decided you wanted to apply.<sup>41</sup>

The NPC web site<sup>42</sup> is apparently well-targeted and fast. Bournville<sup>43</sup> neatly backs up its commitment to international recruiting by welcoming the surfer in 12 languages, although I'd just like to say that using little GIF pictures of text is evil. The Harvard Business School<sup>44</sup> is confusingly conceptual, downloads slowly,<sup>45</sup> and doesn't actually contain any information.<sup>46</sup> Plymouth<sup>47</sup> was cited for its good use of frames.<sup>48</sup>

The American Builders' Association<sup>49</sup> was noted as an example of a site that looked too much like a book: long prose should be avoided and images should be used to break text.<sup>50</sup> Dorling Kindersley<sup>51</sup> in contrast uses clear space and imagery to good effect.

"My watch has stopped at 7 minutes past 10"

The AMBA<sup>52</sup> site is apparently really slow, and information is four or five clicks deep.

If you're going to use forms to extract information from visitors, make them quick, short and not too probing. In terms of response, feedback and interaction, Yahoo!<sup>53</sup> is bad but ESPO,<sup>54</sup> Birkbeck<sup>55</sup> and MBA Explorer<sup>56</sup> are good.<sup>57</sup>

It is important to regularly update a site to keep people coming back.<sup>58</sup> Thesaurus on-line<sup>59</sup> was cited positively in this respect.

Finally<sup>60</sup> it is important to work hard keeping a site registered on search engines and directories, and not to ignore the *off*-line promotion of web sites.<sup>61,62</sup>

So, lunch, and afterwards a choice between **Image, Communication and Publicity for the NPC** for anyone who hadn't had enough of that sort of thing in the morning, and **Research Councils' Graduate Schools Programme: Doctoral Personal Skills Training** with Dr. Iain Cameron<sup>63</sup> of the EPSRC.<sup>64</sup> I could tell you about what he said, but you really had to be there.<sup>65</sup>

Afternoon tea was followed by Jeremy's talk on **Postgraduate Networks: UK Initiatives and Global Comparisons**<sup>66</sup> which introduced SPIN (the Scottish Postgraduates' Information Network) and PiNet (the Postgraduates' International Network).<sup>67</sup>

The SPIN is intended to complement NPC rather than conflict with it: it is autonomous but linked to

<sup>35</sup> Incidentally, <http://www.scit.wlv.ac.uk/ukinfo/uk.map.html> is very useful for finding academic institutions in the UK.

<sup>36</sup> <http://www.motherwell.ac.uk/> but the connection failed.

<sup>37</sup> <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/postgrad/>

<sup>38</sup> If you can't get to anything you want within three clicks, the site is too complicated. I think there's something in New Scientist which compares this sort of thing to the Kevin Bacon Game.

<sup>39</sup> <http://www.cam.ac.uk/>

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.lbs.ac.uk/>

<sup>41</sup> However, I seemed to find contact details and a place to request more information within seconds.

<sup>42</sup> <http://www.npc.org.uk/>

<sup>43</sup> <http://www.bournville.ac.uk/>

<sup>44</sup> <http://www.hbs.edu/>

<sup>45</sup> No it doesn't, and besides it's on the other side of the Atlantic and not part of the Joint Academic Network.

<sup>46</sup> Can we please enforce "Content Over Form" in site design? I beg to differ over her verdict on this site anyway.

<sup>47</sup> <http://www.plymouth.ac.uk/> downloading more slowly than the Harvard Business School and is causing Word to misbehave while I wait... oh, the server's just stopped responding.

<sup>48</sup> See <http://www.warwick.ac.uk/staff/N.J.O.Barton/nasty.html> because frames are evil and pointless. She mentioned the problem of just getting an irrelevant frame when attempting to print a site out but didn't indicate why Plymouth was different. It's perfectly possible to keep the same button bar on every page with using frames because Warwick does that.

<sup>49</sup> Can't seem to find it.

<sup>50</sup> The extra time it takes to download gratuitous images gives the surfer a moment to relax, presumably.

<sup>51</sup> <http://www.dk.com/> or <http://www.dorlingkindersley.com/> but neither of them look anything like the site in the presentation.

<sup>52</sup> Presumably *not* <http://www.plasticsnet.com/amba/>

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.yahoo.com/> ?

<sup>54</sup> <http://rowlf.cc.wvu.edu:8080/~epsoweb/index.html> I suppose...

<sup>55</sup> <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/>

<sup>56</sup> <http://www.gmat.org/> wonder if you can order one by credit card?

<sup>57</sup> Chat rooms were suggested but I have my doubts.

<sup>58</sup> Otherwise they're "cob" (sic.) web sites... *ha bloody ha*.

<sup>59</sup> Not quite <http://www.facstaff.bucknell.edu/rbeard/diction.html> but this seems like a nice site anyway.

<sup>60</sup> I'm leaving out the stuff about advertising whether stealthy or blatant.

<sup>61</sup> I think we tried this at Warwick with little flyers, and decided it was a waste of time.

<sup>62</sup> I'd just like to mention her use of the phrases "On the hoof" and "grazed over" in the same sentence.

<sup>63</sup> He concluded that he was at a "self-organising conference" when he had to introduce himself. He also asserts that "we learn best when safe and happy" and that "physics students are not connected into the real world in the same way as other people."

<sup>64</sup> <http://www.epsrc.ac.uk/>

<sup>65</sup> Jamie arrived at some point during the afternoon but I forget exactly when. David and I were having trouble making decisions without him.

<sup>66</sup> In a change to the advertised program: Paul Clark was due on but he hadn't arrived yet.

<sup>67</sup> Spookily... oh, never mind.

the NPC and the Scottish Sabbaticals. It will communicate by mailbase.<sup>68</sup>

The PiNet exists to co-ordinate many countries' NPC equivalents (mainly Europe, the US, Australia and Hong Kong involved<sup>69</sup> so far I think) with a database register for support of students' union representation and research interests. Jeremy went to their set-up conference in Budapest and came back in charge of it, or something.

The last session of the day was the postponed talk from the delayed Paul Clark (Chief Executive of the Institute for Learning and Teaching)<sup>70,71</sup> on **Supporting Excellence in Learning and Teaching**. Whilst us postgrads are involved with teaching I think this organisation is for proper grown-ups so I'll leave it at that.

The **Annual Dinner** took place in the aircraft hangar which we'd decided was actually quite nice.<sup>72</sup> Your correspondent was glad that he'd brought a suit and tie.

During dinner the subject of contact lenses came up, there being a minority<sup>73</sup> of advocates on our table.<sup>74</sup> Just to prove a point,<sup>75</sup> your correspondent removed and re-inserted his left lens during the discussion and nobody seemed to notice.

Afterwards, nobody seemed to be interested in buying more drink from the bar there so it closed<sup>76</sup> and eventually we made our moves back to the GSA bar. Some felt it necessary to venture off into Norwich only to return at about 4:00am.

Saturday morning was taken up by the **AGM**, with Martin Gough in the chair. Many non-voting members took the opportunity to be elsewhere.

Here is the vague form of the original agenda:

1. Introductions
2. Minutes

3. Matters Arising
4. Officers' Reports
5. Amendments to constitution
6. Amendments to bylaws
7. Amendments to policy
8. Accounts
9. Elections
10. Other motions: press relations
11. AOB

The introduction went well. Everything began to go wrong after that: nobody had actually seen any of the minutes we were supposed to be approving and there were no paper copies around at the meeting.

Some of the officers gave their reports, but the accountant's report turned into a defence of his accounts.<sup>77</sup>

However, when the amendments came up everything frankly fell to bits. Nobody was familiar enough with the constitution to know what the changes meant,<sup>78</sup> and everyone seemed to feel the need to make the same points over and over again rather tediously.

Briefly, the first amendment added a mention of education to the objects of the NPC and nobody minded too much about this. What munged the day was the attempt to define the term "Past" in relation to the last person to hold an NPC post who isn't the current incumbent. Various ways of putting this were offered, some of them unintentionally.<sup>79</sup>

At some point we began to wonder if it was worth debating which amendment to go with and not long after this everything descended into bad student politics<sup>80</sup> and the AGM voted no-confidence in the chair. Rachel Hall took over and it was tea-break time so that's what we did.<sup>81</sup>

After the break, with our scapegoat released, we decided not to bother with any of the amendments.

"Going to work in a university; going to keep myself pure"

<sup>68</sup> Forebodings of doom on a £5 note please to Jamie Darwen, c/o the Union.

<sup>69</sup> And the United Nations.

<sup>70</sup> "Another middle-class trade union."

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.ilt.ac.uk> and in real life, the science park at York University.

<sup>72</sup> In contrast to the rest of the campus which gives the impression of a Quake level conceived by M. C. Escher, the Sainsbury's Centre is nice from the outside as well as from the inside.

<sup>73</sup> Only me, if memory serves.

<sup>74</sup> So that the readers for the following night's entertainment could sit with Jeremy and other NPC nargs, the Warwick delegation was bumped off to a random table but I didn't mind.

<sup>75</sup> And also in the spirit of childish showing off.

<sup>76</sup> Typical.

<sup>77</sup> And there was much wailing and gnashing of teeth...

<sup>78</sup> However, that didn't stop them from caring: perhaps the constitutional sub-committee could have done a better job of deciding a new form of words for itself rather than leaving it to a crowd of baying delegates in need of their collective late-morning caffeine fix, or perhaps we ought to let the chair interpret the word of the constitution in a sensible way rather than trying in vain to set everything up with completely unambiguous wording.

<sup>79</sup> "I cannot propose that motion and I don't care."

<sup>80</sup> It's probably the nature of postgraduate activists to be confrontational: many of us have had to fight against our universities, our unions, or even the students we're trying to represent.

<sup>81</sup> Someone commented about "fireworks" but I said that it seemed more like underground nuclear testing.

Martin proposed a motion for delegates to “keep their comments short and not make the chair’s job difficult” which everyone supported. The atmosphere was generally much lighter by now.

So then many of the NPC posts got filled uncontested... Jeremy remains as General Secretary and the others sat down when the music stopped. Entertainingly, whenever Rachel was proposed for a post she had to pass the chair to James the minutes’ secretary, meaning Jeremy had to take the minutes. When the fuff was over everyone reverted. After this had happened a few times it was poetry in motion to watch. Your correspondent laid low and successfully failed to get elected to any posts, and that’s probably enough about the AGM.

On a not-very-much-lighter note, the first session that afternoon<sup>82</sup> concerned the general negativity of **The PhD Experience** and this was given by Ewan Gillon, the Research Officer (education policy) of the Association of University Teachers. This project involved NPC, AUT, Natfhe and NUS.<sup>83</sup>

Most students simply drift into PhDs. Some get many different supervisors due to the way that academia works.<sup>84</sup> When there is a supervising team of 2 or 3 academics (or one of them is an industrial supervisor) then there will inevitably be conflicts. This also makes it more impractical to arrange meetings.

“It all gets screwed up by a bunch of well-meaning master’s students”

It is a difficult balance for supervisors to strike between telling the student what to do all the time and leaving the student floundering. There is a lack of training for supervisors and a massive degree of dissatisfaction. Data is not easily available on teaching because so many PhD students are considered casual staff, but in general there is poor training for teaching and preparation time for tutorials/supervisions tends not to be sufficiently paid.<sup>85</sup>

As far as completion is concerned, nobody finishes in three years<sup>8</sup> so most write-up part-time with little access to or support from supervisors. The four year brick wall that funding councils have now introduced means that students deregister for a short period.

<sup>82</sup> “Hope you have had a good lunch; I needed a good lunch.”  
<sup>83</sup> The **Beginners** (sic.) **Guide to Complaints: As Easy as A, B, C (Advice, Best Practice, Codes of Practice)** session was cancelled at short notice because Don Staniford (NPC Project Officer) couldn’t make it.  
<sup>84</sup> Mainly the short-term nature of tenure.  
<sup>85</sup> There is also a lack of (and a difficulty with) standardisation. The best thing to do is to work out what salary you’d be on if you taught full time, and get your hourly rate from that.

The next session, given by Martin Harris<sup>86</sup> “Report,” concerned **Progress and Prospects in Postgraduate Policy**.<sup>87</sup>

There exists a large variation in master’s courses. Many things that are called master’s courses now should perhaps not be, but there is “no overseas market for anything that isn’t called ‘M’ something.”

Clear definition and nomenclature is obviously required: some master’s courses take something to a level beyond a bachelor’s degree, whereas some add an entirely new skill.<sup>88</sup> Apparently, significant numbers take a master’s course to rebadge themselves in terms of which university they are from.<sup>89</sup>

In terms of provision, it was pointed out that PhD students don’t necessarily join at the beginning of the academic year, and one institution is munging itself in terms of QAA by saying that it is very keen to enrol part-time students while its library opens only from 9:00am to 5:00pm on weekdays.

A major point to bear in mind is that the expansion of higher education is leading to great diversity; just because things are different does not mean they can not all be equally of good quality. Also, diversity within an institution<sup>90</sup> is a good thing but the law tries to impose homogeneity.

In terms of influencing policy, a document is very powerful once it is part of a QAA code of practice. Also, in Martin’s experience, roughly half of the (30 or 40) individuals who end up with major influences on policy appear unexpectedly.<sup>91</sup>

The session after the afternoon break was given by Margaret Orchard<sup>92</sup> of Leeds University, where a list of 26 “learning outcomes” for PhD programmes has been written. The session therefore concerned

<sup>86</sup> “I’d forgotten quite how attractive this campus was.”  
<sup>87</sup> “Research opportunities should only be offered where students can be trained and supported within an environment which is supported of research.”  
<sup>88</sup> I remember, though, what it was like in the university committees when we attempted to make sense of the recommendations and didn’t like them one little bit. This was probably because the document was meant for education professionals rather than actual academics.  
<sup>89</sup> Warwick University degrees are particularly prestigious: apparently we will all “get a job within 10 seconds of graduating.”  
<sup>90</sup> That is, that different departments and centres are best run in different ways.  
<sup>91</sup> Half the policy-influencing individuals come from obvious places like university committees or union sabbatical positions... the other half are those who have something they really want sorting out and are prepared to badger for it.  
<sup>92</sup> “Can we work more smarter?”

## Managing Personal Development: Learning Outcomes as an Aid to Education.

This session involved participation: we were put into groups of 4 or 5 and asked to write down what we thought we'd get out of our PhDs, under the headings of *Research, Presentation and Communication, Research and working environment* and *Personal effectiveness*. Those of us who were well into our PhDs already knew what we were getting out of it. We wrote down "brevity and conciseness"<sup>93</sup> and not a lot else.

This group activity was followed by a related exercise asking us each to assess our strengths in specific skills. There wasn't time to deal with all of them.<sup>94</sup> The general conclusion was that having a set of Learning Outcomes to bear in mind was helpful but your correspondent knows how averse we all are to self-assessment.<sup>95</sup>

There then followed dinner, and (**Creative Writing at UEA: discussion and**) readings from Paul Magrs and Julia Bell. Your correspondent will not attempt any literary criticism,<sup>96</sup> except to say that the taut, idea-packed and lucid prose produced by our readers contrasted sharply with the long rambling questions and comments produced by the delegates.

The rest of the evening was spent discussing the mappings between flavours of real foods and crisps,<sup>97</sup> the role of science in the philosophy of Deleuze and Guattari,<sup>98</sup> and three litres of spirits.<sup>99</sup> Nobody's entirely sure what was going on down by the lake that evening because it was very dark and misty.<sup>18</sup>

"Take this and stick it up somewhere appropriate"

<sup>93</sup> (sic.) yes, I know it should be "concision."

<sup>94</sup> Either we have too many skills, or time management isn't one of them.

<sup>95</sup> Has everyone here returned their annual report forms to the Graduate School?

<sup>96</sup> And not try to invite any.

<sup>97</sup> In particular, that the prawn-cocktail co-ordinates in each space do not map to each other.

<sup>98</sup> Either one can discard it without losing the philosophy (in which case they should) or it is necessary to the philosophy (in which case they should get it right.) They admit, on one hand, that their lack of expertise in the field means that they sometimes have "used science unscientifically" (in the introduction to "*What Is Philosophy?*" [1994] I think) but they also say (in the same text) that they are "building a philosophy on the mathematics of differentiation and the biology of differentiation" (their italics) as if the fact that these two terms have similar spellings means that their meanings are related. The fact that there's over 20 books of this stuff doesn't mean that, in any vague scientific or mathematical sense at all, the statement "Chaos is defined not so much by its disorder as by the infinite speed with which every form taking shape in it vanishes" (Chapter 5) isn't nonsense.

<sup>99</sup> 1.5 litres of Famous Grouse and 1.5 litres of vodka, plus a few bottles of lemonade. Luckily, at the end of the evening the lemonade was left behind in your correspondent's room which was very helpful the following morning.

And so the last day dawned: in the first session Professor Bob Burgess asked whether there was **A Future for Postgraduate Training?**

In the mid-1980's, "for every 10 social scientists that started with an award, only 1 completed 3 to 4 years hence." At UCLA, the completion time is something like 7½ years. What Bob has in mind is that 60% of the first year of a PhD (for social sciences at least) should be spent on training in research methodology. Provision can be broken down into three levels:

- *Institutional*: Faculty courses, Methodology, Teaching, Careers.
- *Departmental*: Subject Specific Training, Teaching/Assessment.
- *Individual*: Methodology, Writing,<sup>100</sup> Dissemination,<sup>101</sup> Careers.

If so much time is to be spent being trained, then should the training earn credit towards the PhD? There are taught doctorates where this makes sense (apparently) but what about research theses? A record of courses could be presented at the beginning of the thesis, or a methodological or research design account could form a chapter. In this way, the balancing time spent on thesis research with time spent in training is not so problematic.

**Is there a (sic.) ideal form of postgraduate student organisation?** asked Martin Gough next that morning. I think the main conclusion from this is that Warwick is doing quite nicely as they go.

Your corresponded decided to ignore the 12:00 noon sessions and take the opportunity to sit on top of the hill on campus and finish his book until it was time to return for Jeremy's **Closing Remarks**. The Warwick delegation decided not to stay around for lunch, and headed west.

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<sup>100</sup> "If you can write effectively then you're two-thirds of the way towards a PhD." The reader may wonder at this point if your correspondent is doomed.

<sup>101</sup> To get lots of papers out early and increase your CV power, get a post doctoral or research fellow position.