

Council for College and University English

The following report was sent by the Chair to the British Academy on 11th October 2000 in response to their invitation to contribute to a review of postgraduate studies.

The British Academy's Review of Graduate Studies in the Humanities and Social Sciences

I write on behalf of the Council for College and University English in reply to Professor Bennett's letter of 9 August.

In preparing a response in the time available, CCUE has consulted widely in the English subject community in UK HEIs. Twenty one institutions replied to our invitation to review particular areas of concern relating to postgraduate students in English. What follows is a collation of the responses under various headings.

(1) Recruitment and retention of postgraduate students. It is clear that there are plenty of able, enthusiastic and highly motivated students who wish to pursue postgraduate work in English. The problem is funding. As one respondent puts it, 'Every year we have good applicants for graduate places who are not able to take up the places we offer them entirely for funding reasons'. There are insufficient awards to meet demand through the AHRB Studentship Competitions (year on year, many outstandingly good applicants do not get awards), and HEIs cannot fund sufficient Studentships or Graduate Assistantships to meet demand from well-qualified applicants. The level of debt incurred during years of undergraduate study, recently compounded by the introduction of tuition fees, prevents rather than simply discourages students from continuing their studies at graduate level and there are signs of worrying consequences in terms of the class and economic profile of those undertaking postgraduate study. As one respondent put it, 'At the very time when the government is trying (it claims) to widen access to undergraduate education, access to postgraduate education and to the profession itself is narrowing'. It was also noted that it is particularly difficult to get an award in AHRB Studentship Competition A even though the AHRB promotes the 'one-plus-three' model of funding by which a first year of postgraduate study that includes training in research methods is seen as essential in ensuring that subsequent doctoral work is completed on time. Other problems noted include the following. Part funding of research students is no real substitute for full funding - it is very difficult for part-timers to maintain a clear sense of professional outcomes when they frequently have to work in low-paid jobs to support themselves. Departments in smaller institutions (especially some Colleges and new universities) secure very limited amounts of support funding for postgraduate scholarships despite many of them having very good applicants for postgraduate study, staff qualified to supervise them and a willingness to commit resources to nurturing a research student culture. There is as yet no developed tradition of funding through Teaching Assistantships as there is in North America. Particular concern was registered about the difficulties UK students experience in undertaking graduate study: high-recruiting graduate schools (such as Oxford) are, in the words of one respondent, 'mostly finishing schools for fee-paying foreign students'. The point was also made that it was not usually difficult to retain overseas students who tended to study in the U.K. only if fully-funded anyway.

(2) Problems of staff recruitment to the profession. Though some institutions do not report difficulties in recruiting excellent young staff, others argue that cumulative debt or poverty not redressed by low levels of starting salaries for lecturers in the early stages of their careers will lead to a situation in English like the sciences where university posts eventually won't attract applicants. The diminishing pool of high quality postgraduates clearly has implications for future recruitment to the profession. It is also the case that the lack of secure employment prospects in academia is matched by attractive opportunities in other professions and it needs to be noted that many trained, funded postgraduates are so disillusioned and indebted that they quit academia. The point also has to be made that bridging the period between the completion of the PhD and the first academic teaching post through the funding of postdoctoral fellowships is important for the health of our subject community. One respondent remarked that an important critical mass of intellectual skill which used to be provided by PhDs who were not necessarily *teaching* in universities (i.e. young postdoctoral research fellows) is being diminished. Two of the thirty awards made in The British Academy's Postdoctoral Fellowship Competition 2000 went to researchers who will be based in Schools of English, but while the success of these researchers in the early stages of their careers is to be congratulated and testifies to the strength of our subject, it may be worth considering an expansion in the number of awards made in this scheme.

(3) **Sub-areas of the discipline which we believe might be endangered.** There is anxiety about the future of research in the pre-1800 period particularly in the sub-areas of Old English, Middle English, and Eighteenth-Century Studies. There is also significant concern about Renaissance literary studies and the historical study of literature generally and one respondent remarked that 'American Studies is an endangered species'. Other specific areas mentioned as being under threat include c.19 American literature (with the exception of Henry James), editing, historical scholarship requiring archival research, and English Language - even as schools are recognizing the importance of the latter. Two Scottish HEIs (Aberdeen and Glasgow) noted that some areas of postgraduate study including Scottish Language and Literature attracted many more international than home students, There is also some concern that a rather narrow focus on a PhD topic which will lend itself to swift conversion to a monograph for reasons of securing employment may inhibit creative and innovative research. A senior Professor at a London college made the point that while much exciting new work at graduate level is multidisciplinary, the AHRB selectors for Studentships reject candidates working in these areas more easily than applicants to conventional areas of study. It could also be added that such a policy would seem to be inconsistent with the AHRB's encouragement of inter- or cross-disciplinary research in other areas of its funding provision. A senior Professor in American Studies made the point that American Studies does not have a designated AHRB panel to offer financial aid but gets moved between the subject areas 'English', 'History', and 'Film'. One institution reported that modularization at undergraduate level had led to low-recruiting pre-c.19 literature modules not running with the possible result that there is a thinner knowledge of possible research areas amongst potential postgraduate students.

(4) **Case studies.**

Very few cases studies were forthcoming. However the following may be of interest:

From the University of Leeds:

Student A: had an Oxford MPhil and was offered a place for a PhD on Chaucer (2000-1). Was very enthusiastic but a Canadian University offered her a full scholarship which she felt she could not, because of its exceedingly generous terms, turn down, although, all things being equal, her preference was for Leeds.

Student B: 1999-2000 offered a PhD place on theorizing medieval literature with regard to ideas of space. He was awarded an ORS (1999) but felt that he would not have enough funds to live on. Took a scholarship at the University of Western Ontario instead (plus teaching).

Student C: MA candidate (Medieval) offered a place (2000-1) but has a full scholarship and stipend from Fordham (USA), so is going there.

Student D: MA candidate (English Literature) offered a place (2000-1) but is taking up a fully-funded place at Leiden.

From the University of Oxford:

'One of my first class finalists of last year began work at £15kp.a. with a £2k sweetener "to see her over the long vacation". Join Andersen Consulting, see the world and eat.'

From a new (post 1992) university:

'One student who did an MA self-funded part-time, obtained a distinction in every course and was given high praise by the external. Having not won an award for a PhD, she set out doing it part-time in the hope of a second successful application in the next round (we were able to help her with fees in order to buy her time to put in a strong application). Having again failed, she is again wavering...Given the vast extra spending on government on research support, it seems miserable that, despite what has recently been done, there can't be a significant rise in research student funds. Especially when institutions like ourselves are making an investment from limited resources to support good hopefuls.'

(5) Other issues.

This is a list of further issues raised by respondents to our questionnaire:

- most institutions can list excellent PhDs who have not been able to secure a suitable university post.
- postgraduates sometimes may feel pressurized for financial reasons, including the need to secure a post, to complete theses too quickly and to publish too soon.
- one respondent felt that there was poor quality training of postgraduates to teach even as institutions relied on them to do so;
- concern was expressed about the increasing stress/illness levels of funded students who are attempting to complete PhDs within three years;
- increasing bureaucratic pressures on staff inhibit their opportunities to nurture a postgraduate research culture;
- the vulnerability of library budgets to cuts has a direct effect on resources for research students; • UK graduates have gone to North America to pursue postgraduate study and potential applicants from North America who have wanted to come to the UK have been deterred by lack of funding opportunities by comparison with the USA and Canada;
- a concern that pressure from HEIs on Departments to increase the volume of postgraduate students is matched by inadequating resourcing of such an increase in numbers.

Dr Michael Rossington,

11 October 2000