Autumn 2009
University of Kent
the GradPost

The perks of postgraduate life

The art of space

Welcome to the Graduate School

A newsletter created by postgraduates for postgraduates
Welcome

The Graduate School would like to take this opportunity to welcome all our new postgraduate students to the University.

We trust that whether you are embarking on a taught course or undertaking research, you will have an enjoyable experience here with us at Kent. Should you have any queries about graduate matters during your first few weeks or over the coming months, please do not hesitate to contact us (see contacts below). We wish you well with your studies and hope that you are settling in.

What the Graduate School can do for you

The Graduate School works across the University to enhance the quality of the postgraduate student experience at all our campuses in order to create a vibrant postgraduate community at Kent. We aim to ensure that the academic and social interests of postgraduate students, both taught and research, are appropriately provided for within the University by supporting and developing:

- high-quality postgraduate facilities and resources
- a supportive environment for the intellectual interests of our postgraduates
- student-led initiatives such as social events, conferences and workshops
- an excellent transferable skills development programme
- a strong framework of specialist support across the University

Championing your interests

The University has established systems and an academic framework which have the interests of the postgraduate student community at their heart. Each academic school and faculty has one or more Directors of Graduate Studies responsible for overseeing the quality and development of postgraduate studies at these levels.

The Graduate School has its own Board at institutional level which is responsible for overseeing, developing and enhancing postgraduate policies for both taught and research students. The views of our students are critical to the successful development of the postgraduate student experience at Kent and our Board includes four postgraduate student members who are responsible for representing your views to the University. The members include the Woolf College Student President and three postgraduate student representatives (one from each Faculty). These representatives are elected by the postgraduate student community.

To find out more, please see our website at: www.kent.ac.uk/graduateschool/

Key skills development

The Graduate School co-ordinates the transferable skills training programme for postgraduate students. Transferable skills are those skills which when developed, give postgraduates a clear edge in the job market and make postgraduate researchers more effective and efficient in their work. We offer a broad range of sessions that are designed to hone competencies such as communication, presentation, networking, teamwork, career management and time management skills.

Find out more about key skills at: www.kent.ac.uk/graduateschool/skills/index.html

“Research skills training can give students a résumé full of practical courses, evidence of public speaking and presentation skills, and experience in activities which show leadership and an engagement with the wider world. Transferable skills which have been applied to a student’s research and leadership activities while at university really can give that vital edge of experience and is therefore of enormous value to postgraduates in whatever career path they choose to follow.”

Diane Heath, postgraduate research student, Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies

Meet the Team

Professor Diane Houston, Dean of the Graduate School

Diane Houston was appointed Dean of the Graduate School in July 2008. Prior to this she was Professor and Head of the School of Psychology. Research interests are within applied social psychology and its interface with sociology and social policy. She has been an advisor to successive UK Ministers for Women and to Government Departments with responsibility for work-life balance, women’s work participation and gender and equality. She was academic advisor to the UK’s Women and Work Commission in 2006. Over the last decade she has held a variety of leadership roles within the British Psychological Society. In 2006 Diane was elected an as an Academician in the Academy of Social Sciences.

Suzie Taylor, Graduate School Administration Manager

Suzie has worked for the University as an administrator since 2003 and was appointed Graduate School Administration Manager in March 2009. As a Kent graduate herself (BA and MA (Research) in French), Suzie is particularly pleased to be working as part of the Graduate School team and looks forward to playing an integral role in the enhancement of the graduate student experience.

Kate Mansfield, Graduate School Co-ordinator

Kate graduated from Aston Business School in 2008 and joined the University of Kent as a member of staff shortly after. Kate enjoys working as a member of the Graduate School and is looking forward to seeing how it develops over time.
Rhionn Binns, Transferable Skills Training
Co-ordinator
Rhionn is the newest member of the team, appointment in July 2009. Rhionn completed her undergraduate studies at Kings College London and obtained an MSc in Sociology from London School of Economics. She has worked in two Sheffield universities prior to her role at Kent where she was a Research Assistant and Research Officer. Rhionn looks forward to working with the Graduate School team.

Kate Rees (the GradPost Editor): How has the Graduate School been developing over the last year and what are your plans for the School during the next academic year?

Professor Diane Houston: I was appointed to the post of Dean of the Graduate School in July 2008 and since then we have been laying the foundations for its successful development. This has involved appointing new members of staff, setting up Graduate School offices (including a student reception), consulting on and implementing how the Graduate School Board (including student representation) will be placed within the academic framework of the University, establishing the Graduate School website and the GradPost newsletter, as well as undertaking various reviews of key postgraduate issues, eg, postgraduate space and skills training.

We have also been working very closely with the Kent Union, academic schools and other central departments to identify areas where we could enhance the quality of the postgraduate student experience, eg, creating more opportunities for social interaction between graduate students.

The School has developed a strategy with four key goals as follows:

Goal A: To increase numbers of taught and research postgraduate students at Kent.

Goal B: To enhance the academic and research environment for postgraduate students.

Goal C: To develop a strong postgraduate community within the University.

Goal D: To support the personal and career development of postgraduate students.

We will be working towards achieving these goals over the course of the next academic year. Graduate students are our greatest asset and our best source of feedback on the quality of the graduate experience at Kent. Should you have any feedback you wish to provide us with during your studies, you can do so through our website at www.kent.ac.uk/graduateschool/feedback.html

The perks of postgraduate life

A shiny undergraduate degree is the reward for going beyond compulsory education and seizing the opportunity to be a student. Some may rest on their laurels, take a breather from the academic mill and perhaps enter work life for a while. However, looming on the horizon are the opportunities of postgraduate life, tempting you back to university for further study.

This may seem daunting at first, as you have just battled your way through numerous exams and celebrated the achievements of your undergraduate degree. Fortunately, these concerns will diminish as you discover the many perks of being a postgraduate. Indeed, everyone has heard that postgraduate education offers riches; it brings you closer to your dream job and gives you opportunities for personal growth. It is rumours like these that may tempt you back to university. But what actually happens once you are there?

After shedding your undergraduate self, you have, once again, set foot on a university campus. This may bring tears to your eyes, either because you have missed it greatly, or because you thought graduation was the final chapter. Either way, much will be familiar to you this time around. You have already laid much of the groundwork, having proven that you can manage your time efficiently by striking a balance between exams, essay writing, socialising and perhaps work life as well. However, as you walk further on towards the thriving campus, you realise that some things have changed. This will not cause you to reconsider and head back home. Rather, as the first hours of your postgraduate life elapse, you will sense a distinct postgraduate atmosphere, accompanied by the fluttering of butterflies in your stomach. If you find yourself wandering through a throng of undergraduates, you will soon break free from the crowd and head to an exclusive postgraduate event. Once there, you meet the gazes of fellow postgraduates and get to know others who, like you, have seen it all before, but still have come back for more.

One of the first things you are likely to notice as a postgraduate is that you become part of a cohesive group of students who have chosen the same degree subject as you. A postgraduate degree allows you to delve more into specific areas of interest, so you finally have someone with whom you can discuss those cutting-edge academic matters, without being frowned at. Besides discussing academic matters, other postgraduates may also be as thrilled as you are about scuba-diving, rock music, table tennis or whatever you enjoy doing in your spare time.

Sports societies, or just purely social societies, are as open to postgraduates as they are to any other students, so there is no need to study all of the time.

Another consequence of your new postgraduate identity is that you continue to absorb knowledge wherever you go. Besides being driven by a need to get your money’s worth, this is an inevitable consequence of smaller and more personal learning contexts. While undergraduates get a ticket close to the stage, postgraduates are allowed to climb up onto it. You will also find that your classes are smaller, requiring student participation and ensuring personal feedback.

As a postgraduate, you can explore whatever interests you in more detail, and resurface with skills that can unlock a future career that was only a dream at undergraduate level.

Besides helping you on the road to self-fulfilment, being a postgraduate has many other perks. Just as you expect your printer quota to dry up and force you to sacrifice your last few pounds, you hear the printer cough up some bonus sheets in honour of your postgraduate status. After this revelation, you might stroll past a group of younger students, pass the local nightclub, or glance through the window of a noisy bar. Perhaps you have a meeting to attend, an experiment to run, or maybe you have a postgraduate party to go to. Indeed, equipped with your new postgraduate personality, your social life is far from dead; it is in fact reborn. Emerging from on-campus housing or crawling up the campus hill, postgraduates can materialise at a rapid rate and throw the most memorable parties. As a postgraduate, you are essentially an upgraded undergraduate – familiar with the ropes, but ready to swing amidst new heights.

Magnus Emil Fossum
MSc in Social and Applied Psychology
Is the whole space the art or just the canvas?

You discover the strangest things on the Canterbury campus, if you look hard enough.

Behind the Engineering and Digital Arts building hides the Sculpture Studio, where MA Fine Art student Sonia Smith has spent eight months completing her artworks with a webcam recording every brushstroke.

Inspired by the work of Patrick Heron, Albert Irvin and Gillian Ayres, Sonia is a passionate student of the creative arts. She completed a BA (Hons) in Fine Art at Ashford School of Art and Design before coming to Kent to take the MA in Fine Art last October. The MA traditionally consists of half theory and half practical work, where her real interest lies. Sonia is a mature student and divides her time between her artistic endeavours and eight grandchildren!

The rationale behind her project is to challenge traditional thinking about the display of artwork, which is often 'tarted up' before exhibition in a gallery. This is about artistic honesty, where part of the viewing experience involves seeing the art where it is originally created, paint spills and all, in order to highlight the connection between artist and the artwork. It could be said that the beauty of a piece of art partly comes from the artistic process itself.

Sonia explains the thinking behind her work in detail: “I feel I have turned the traditional art of painting on its head. The status of the finished artwork has changed with the curation. The canvas, which is historically revered, is now a prop. In the film, rather than using people and figuration to express a narrative, I’m using the tradition of painting. Therefore, these paintings have become props on a stage”.

Sonia chose to create paintings using paper attached to the walls of a white cube area and later, large canvases propped up against the walls, a ‘traditional’ background which she has attempted to anti-institutionalise through the use of film. The artistic process was filmed over an eight-month course, with the camera switched on whenever Sonia was working in the studio. The space gradually filled with Sonia’s art and the camera rolled on. The resultant large volume of footage has been edited and speeded up with the kind help of Max Heide, a student from the School of Engineering and Digital Arts. Over 3 million frames of footage were blended together to create the final ten-minute film. The final still of the film is how the studio has been left and how the work has been exhibited. Sonia felt that moving the art out of the studio would change the artwork and compromise the whole concept of what she was trying to create.

When the artwork was to be displayed in an exhibition on campus, Sonia chose to leave her studio space untouched, displaying the edited version of the film in the exhibition area and a trail of black dotted lines leading any interested parties to the studio itself. A surprising number of people chose to venture away from the exhibition to see her studio for themselves. It is indeed a sight to behold!

Sadly, the studio will have to be dismantled at the end of the exhibition, but the film will remain. This creates a new question: has the film now become the art?

To see the video of Sonia’s work for yourself, go to www.youtube.com/watch?v=pCSqctHnveg

Kate Rees
PhD in Pharmacology

Join the editorial team

You have probably heard about the GradPost and have been prompted throughout the week to join the editorial team. But before you decide whether you will have the time or commitment this year, here are a few reasons why you should join.

For one thing, you get to fulfil your journalistic fantasies by going on assignments, whether it is sitting in on some seminars and writing about them or interviewing other postgraduates. You are provided with an opportunity to gain invaluable experience working in a team in a creative capacity. Also, it would be nice to do something different, while contributing to the postgraduate community. And lastly, even though you have heard this a million times, it looks good on your CV. Well, it does! How many students can boast that they have been an editor for a postgraduate newsletter?

So, why not join our editorial team. Go on, you know you want to!

Victoria Glenn, Welfare Officer, WCSC
MA in European Governance
Focus on research

Jokes aside

I came to my PhD in Drama by an unusual route; I wandered in to it largely by mistake. I returned to the University of Kent in 2007, having studied Drama and History as an undergraduate a couple of years earlier, to begin an MA examining the manipulative potential of stand-up comedy.

The starting point for my research is that jokes are extremely important and complex things. Various theorists have shown that jokes are important social constructs – ‘safe places’ in our everyday interaction where we have license to discuss what we usually would not dare to articulate, and challenge what we usually take for granted. Some challenges are silly. A pun is just a dig at the limits of language or maybe our inability to communicate clearly – either way, it usually doesn’t matter too much. But what about a joke that points out the illogic of, say, criminalising cannabis in a society where alcohol – arguably a more dangerous drug with more damaging social effects – is embraced and its consumption largely encouraged? I should point out that this is not my idea – it was Bill Hicks who made a very funny, and very persuasive, argument along these lines and his material has been quoted by fans ever since.

Hicks is now hailed as a legend and a prophet, and he is certainly not alone; many other comedians have been seen as similarly influential social commentators. A popular comedian reaches an audience of thousands of committed followers, and it is clear that they can be influential in shaping the views not just of individuals, but of groups too. Activist comedian Mark Thomas claims to have been instrumental in changing legislation and policies that affect whole countries.

This is odd because we usually watch comedy thinking that what is said can be disregarded. We let our guard down and laugh along with ideas that we might usually question because ‘it’s only a joke’. Yet sometimes – perhaps very often – the ideas stick. When we laugh, we validate the comedian and encourage our fellow audience members to follow. When we tell someone else about the performance, quoting the jokes we heard, we’re repeating the ideas, spreading them and usually paying very little attention to whether these ideas should be repeated, whether we should be persuaded of their logic.

It soon became evident that my MA would barely scratch the surface of what I wanted to say. So I find myself coming to the end of the second year of what is now a PhD. My admittedly silly route has left me self-funding and therefore holding down a couple of jobs alongside my studies but, hard work though it is, I am loving my time at the University of Kent (again) and thoroughly enjoying my research.

Sophie Quirk
PhD in Drama

Kent Union

Since the first edition of the GradPost was published, Kent Union has been working hard to develop its services for postgraduate students here at Kent. Over the autumn term, we have a series of events and activities organised for students who are studying and working on campus; here is just a flavour of them:

Saturday 31 October 2009:
Halloween Night in Rutherford Bar – a night to meet with fellow postgraduate students, enjoy poetry and literature, and indulge in spooky cocktails.

Thursday 19 November 2009:
Beaujolais Wine Evening – an evening of fine wine in Rutherford Bar.

Thursday 26 November 2009:
Come and join in with traditional Thanksgiving celebrations in Rutherford Bar with friends from around the globe.

PG Forum

This forum is the opportunity for you to have your say.

Wednesday 28 October 2009, 6-7pm
(Woolf Seminar Room 4).

Wednesday 2 December 2009, 6-7pm
(Woolf Seminar Room 4).

Following the PG Forum, there will be an opportunity to enjoy a drink or some food in Rutherford Bar.

Over the next six months, Kent Union will be carrying out research to find out what postgraduate students want from services such as the Advice Centre and JobShop. If you are interested in taking part in a focus group or have any suggestions, please email Rachel Evans (Representation and Democracy Manager) at r.evans@kent.ac.uk

Don’t forget that Kent Union is run for students by students! To find out more about the elected officers for 2009/10, visit www.kentunion.co.uk
University of Kent – PG Support Services

Student Learning Advisory Service (SLAS)
The Student Learning Advisory Service (SLAS) is a free and friendly advice service, providing guidance and information on all aspects of effective learning and study skills to all students.

For more information visit: www.kent.ac.uk/uel/learning/

Careers Advisory Service
The Careers Advisory Service offers support to postgraduate students to achieve their career aims following the completion of their programmes or research.

For more information, visit www.kent.ac.uk/careers/PDWPgrad.htm

Innovation and Enterprise
Here at Kent, our aim is to build on the growing enterprise culture and activities to help you to become truly enterprising. Many of our courses incorporate project work and placements within companies, and we offer modules on business and enterprise.

To find more, visit www.kent.ac.uk/enterprise/student_enterprise/

Information Services Helpdesk
A student and staff support service to assist in Kent IT Services.
T: 01227 824999
or visit www.kent.ac.uk/itservices/students

Counselling Service
The Counselling Service is an integral part of the welfare services offered on campus free of charge to part-time and full-time staff and students.

For more information, visit www.kent.ac.uk/counselling/

Disability and Dyslexia Support Service (DDSS)
The Disability and Dyslexia Support Service is committed to improving access to learning for all students and providing a wide range of education support services.

For more information, email accessibility@kent.ac.uk or visit www.kent.ac.uk/ddss/

PG Tips
"As an undergrad, you could call your professors by their first names, but as a postgraduate you can go out socialising with them (just be sure to bring your camera to capture any funny material)."

Claire Murphy
School of Psychology

PG Snapshot
Name: Mickaël El Hachmane
Course: PhD in Neuropharmacology
Supervisor: Professor Alistair Mathie
Campus: Medway
Academic Interests: The potassium channels in neuronal diseases
Academic hero: Charlie Chaplin
Place of Birth: France
Favourite cheese: Mozzarella
Favourite colour: Chocolate
Favourite film: The Usual Suspects
("The greatest trick the devil ever pulled was convincing the world he didn’t exist.")

The best thing about being a postgraduate student at Kent is:
The nice landscapes and places you can find not too far from the University for a walk. It’s good to refresh the brain and to keep working in a good spirit

Favourite place to eat on campus: Gulbenkian Café at Medway

Top tip for PG study (and everything):
"Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world." (Albert Einstein)

If you would like to be the next star of PG Snapshot, please contact us for a questionnaire at grad-editors@kent.ac.uk

Vote for your Woolf College Committee!
Woolf College will elect a new committee in October for the 2009/10 academic year. Elections open on Thursday 24 September and will close on Friday 2 October. Nomination forms are available from the Mandela reception or more information is available online at www.kentunion.co.uk