I have been a Woolf College resident since 2008. The four walls of my room have been my home and sanctuary. I dream and imagine from there. I interact with the University from there. My flatmates, previous and current, make up a league of nations (China, Cyprus, France, Indonesia, Kenya, Nigeria, Mauritius, Saudi Arabia). This is but a microcosm of the postgraduate community on campus. It’s big and diverse. As such, it’s good we now have active representation through the Graduate Student Association and in Kent Union.

My involvement with The Grad Post has been a long and enduring commitment. Together with Kate Rees (founding editor), year in year out, we have welcomed new people on the editorial team. This winter issue is the first under my editorship. I welcome on board new faces (Chris Costa, Marion Auclair, Tom Brown, Neil van Beinum and Kelly O’Neill). It’s a new season full of new ideas so expect new exciting things. But hey, The Grad Post is not just the editorial team, it’s the readers too.

We appreciate your feedback and contributions so please share your research, campus gossip, conference reports or interviews with your heroes. Get involved by contacting us on grad-editors@kent.ac.uk.

Tinashe Mushakavanhu
Chief GradPost Editor

Editorial

Volunteering in Vietnam: A year to remember

The organisation helps victims of ‘Agent Orange’, the toxic herbicide sprayed on the Vietnamese jungle by American forces during the Vietnam war in the 60s and 70s. Its purpose was to remove the dense foliage, which provided cover for the enemy. However, the local population was affected by the resulting contamination of the food chain and the next two generations showed specific mental and physical disabilities.

Virginie said, “It wasn’t always easy to manage an LLM, a student job and a volunteer position like this, but my entire career has sprung from this commitment so it was definitely worth sacrificing some time for it!”

“In the summer of 2009, I went on a field trip to Hau Giang Province in the Mekong Delta (South Vietnam), with a mission to collect some preliminary data on the victims of Agent Orange in the region. This was particularly difficult to manage because I had to write my dissertation, but I was in a village so remote that there was no internet access, only intermittent access to electricity and, of course, nobody spoke a word of English.”

Virginie was in charge of the party when potential donors decided to visit the village they were staying in. The visit took an unexpected turn. A group of rogue secret police from Hau Giang Province arrested the members of the organisation, confiscated their passports and demanded ‘administration fees’ in exchange for the return of their passports. After three hours of negotiation in the searing summer heat, the group still refused to pay. They were then taken to a police station and the charity director was separated from her colleagues and questioned for two hours. She was forced to sign a document in exchange for the group’s release, which accused the charity and its members of operating illegally. The group was allowed to return to the village but, in the days that followed, the rogue police continued their harassment with the aim of seizing the charity’s assets and scaring away foreigners. The most important legal battle of the Province started.

The charity received the support of the Hanoi-based law firm INVENCO and the government. Corruption is endemic in Hau Giang, but the legal proceedings gave people hope. However, the rogue police were oblivious to rulings from Hanoi and charity members received death threats. The charity has stopped operating in the Province for the safety of its members, but hopes to return one day. Meanwhile, it has teamed up with the Victims of Agent Orange Vietnam Association in the province of Thai Binh in North Vietnam to provide support for victims there.

Virginie went on to start work in Singapore after being approached in Vietnam by her current employer. She is now a chief information officer, and is working on introducing new teaching methods to a university in Indonesia. She has travelled around the world to places including Hawaii, Los Angeles, Paris, Hong Kong and Singapore to research university management practices.

Her advice is very simple: “Don’t be scared to act and take opportunities”. As one of her bosses would say; “Learn to make a life; not just a living!”

Marion Auclair
LLM International Law with International Relations

Virginie Servant, 24, studied for an LLM in International Law with International Relations at the University of Kent from 2008 to 2009. In addition to her studies, she took on a volunteer role to help manage a Vietnam Village Children’s Fund.

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Marion Auclair
LLM International Law with International Relations
Focus on research

The violence of Ciudad Juarez, Mexico

My name is Alejandro Dodds and I am in my second year of a PhD in Criminology within the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research. My thesis is an investigation into the sources of violence in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico since January 2008. Before then, the city had an average of 250 murders annually, but since 2008 Ciudad Juarez has seen over 7,043 murders, making it the most violent city in the world. This year alone, there have been over 2,324 murders.

I am scrutinising the official Mexican and American explanations for this violence in the context of the historical and current forms of organised drug smuggling in the El Paso–Juarez borderland, and I am also interviewing individuals who have been directly affected by violence. My research so far has revealed that the official explanation for this violence – that the Juarez and Sinaloa drug cartels are fighting each other for drug smuggling primacy in the city – is not the complete story. Interviews with my research participants revealed that the violence they suffered was in fact often perpetrated by Mexican authorities, backed by US pronouncements and aid.

I was born and raised in Ciudad Juarez’s neighbouring city, El Paso, Texas, and I have always been focused on its nearby city. Ciudad Juarez was home to my mother after she and her family (originally from Delicias, Mexico) lived there before settling down in El Paso. This movement is not rare; there are an average of 32 million legal crossings between the cities per year, and historian David Romo has called El Paso the Ellis Island of the American south-west. My interest in Ciudad Juarez was increased during my Master’s studies at Eastern Kentucky University, where I examined the official discourses used to legitimise the militarisation of the El Paso–Juarez border, which led to militarisation of the entire US–Mexico border. Criminologists have not yet studied contemporary violence in Ciudad Juarez so I am the first to do so.

This work is important not only because of the death toll, but also because Ciudad Juarez is a distinct location that shows the interaction between several policies, both of the US and Mexico. In this city, we can examine the efficacy of the neoliberal economic model, border militarisation, the international prohibition on drugs (led by the US), and the militarised anti-cartel campaign in Mexico. In this thesis, I argue that these policies are destabilising Ciudad Juarez; the recent high murder rate is just one manifestation of these American and Mexican policy failures.

I had first considered coming to the University of Kent in spring 2005, while working on my BA in Philosophy at Texas Christian University. It was there that I first investigated cultural criminology, enabling me to see Ciudad Juarez from different perspectives. In 2009, I continued this interest by starting a PhD at Kent. The main reason I came here was to work with Dr Keith Hayward, an internationally renowned scholar in criminology, and a leading thinker in cultural criminology. Kent was an ideal choice because it encourages a multi-disciplinary approach to studying international criminology: Like most PhD students, I found that the more I study my topic, the more complex it becomes. Despite this complexity, I have found the School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research to be a brilliant place to study. No matter what questions arise during my research, there is always an expert with an open door ready to discuss the topic.

While I am still in the midst of my research, I am clear that social problems like those of Ciudad Juarez should have social solutions and should not be seen as military problems with militarised solutions. As anthropologist Philippe Bourgois has pointed out, a military approach only exacerbates the problems it is trying to solve and particularly impacts those lowest on the socio-economic ladder.

Alejandro Dodds
PhD Criminology

Confessions of a Poet

It’s two in the morning. I’m three quarters of the way through a bottle of whisky. I’m heartbroken, too, but that goes without saying. Someone’s playing slow, sad minor chords on a guitar in the corner while I puff furiously on a cigarette. I bash my typewriter keys in existential despair and deliberate anguish over the use of a semi-colon or a comma. With a flourish of my wrist, I opt for the semi-colon.

Or so some people would like to believe. Regrettably, however, this is a long way removed from the truth. I study Creative Writing, specifically the writing of poetry. Whenever I say this to anyone, they instantly conjure such marvellous scenes as the one above, but it’s actually a somewhat outdated and even detrimental preconception. Incidentally, I’m not even certain I’d call myself a poet: I write poetry. This is in much the same way that I don’t really call myself a footballer, I just like to play football.

Don’t get me wrong. I’d love for the stereotypes to be true. What I wouldn’t give to be a true bohemian! But I don’t like whisky, nor do I smoke. I’ve got a typewriter, but I never use it because my laptop’s easier. That being said, I am teaching myself guitar and am more often than not, in some shade or another, heartbroken. Maybe there’s hope for me yet. But you don’t have to be a depressive or an alcoholic or, simply phrased, a pretentious intellectual in order to write poetry or anything creative.

The whole ethos of poetry is that it is able to communicate feeling and emotion to the reader; anyone can write it (though not everyone can write it well) and you don’t have to be wearing an expensive hat or experiencing some kind of profound metaphysical happening in order to do so. Though maybe it would be fun. I like hats especially.

I suppose my point is that although these stereotypes of troubled artists can be fun, it’s not really lifelike. Creativity is universal, there should be no elite. I don’t spend all my free time reading non-translated 14th-century French poetry. In my hours off, I like nothing better than sitting down in front of the TV and putting on a classic Arnie film. And you know what? I reckon that if Shakespeare was still around today, he’d love it too.

Tom Brown
MA Creative Writing
Outreach

What is Outreach?

Outreach is a concept endorsed by the University of Kent whereby members of the faculty and student body communicate their work to members of the public (normally schoolchildren) through various events. One particular facet of this programme is the microscopy workshop, currently headed by Biosciences postgraduate students Stephanie Magub, Angelica Barnsby and Alan Scott. The main objectives of the microscopy workshop are as follows:

- to introduce schoolchildren to the concept of magnification through microscopy using various kinds of equipment, ranging from basic handheld magnifying glasses to light microscopes, dissecting microscopes and even the powerful transmission electron microscope
- instil a sense of excitement and enthusiasm for science in the children, and encourage activities that promote learning and a deeper level of understanding and respect of the natural world around them
- encourage the children to consider the pursuit of higher education, both for love of their chosen subject and the idea of student life at the University.

Formation and development of Outreach

The microscopy workshop was conceptualised in 2008, born from a challenge issued by Dr Richard Williamson and Dr Gary Robinson. Biosciences postgraduates were tasked with developing an Outreach event which incorporated many aspects of microscopy, targeted at schoolchildren. The intention was to raise understanding of fundamental ideas, such as magnification, and to foster awareness of organisms or structures too small for the naked eye see in detail.

A PhD student at the time, Sarah Hodson formed and headed the first microscopy Outreach workshop with the participation of other Biosciences postgraduates. With a team comprised of several postgraduates, including new first-year students, the Outreach microscopy workshop continues to grow and evolve, implementing innovative methods for teaching children about magnification.

The microscopy Outreach event

Since the formation of this branch of the Outreach programme, a pilot event was hosted by the University of Kent whereby children from two local schools (Marlowe Academy Ramsgate and Hextable School) visited the campus and Biosciences teaching labs. The first half of the day involved splitting the children into several groups, each looking at different aspects of microscopy (such as light microscopes, dissection microscopes, etc.) using samples collected by the postgraduates. These groups were rotated around periodically so that each child was able to view samples at every station.

Students were taken for lunch to refresh themselves and discuss everything they had seen during the morning session. The second half of the day involved a tour of the transmission electron microscope and explanation of its function. The children were then given an interactive electronic quiz which they can complete, with questions based in the field of microscopy. Finally, the children were introduced to USB microscopes and shown how they could take amazing images with them, and share them with the Outreach community. The University also permits schools to sign out these USB microscopes so the children can take them away to use at school, then upload their images to a website for everyone to view.

Further information

Since the formation of this workshop, many staff and postgraduate students in Biosciences have invested substantial amounts of time and effort into this programme and were rewarded with enthusiasm from and appreciation by the children. The microscopy workshop is always looking for more volunteers to help sustain the high standard of fun and innovative teaching, so if you would like to get involved then contact Stephanie Magub at sjm59@kent.ac.uk. For further information on the microscopy Outreach workshop, please visit the website at http://www.kent.ac.uk/bio/study/Outreach/microscopy/index.html.

“And who are you then?” A Fresher’s Perspective

The trouble with having a foreign name and fairly British accent generally means that people do wish to converse with you, but are reluctant to say your name. This is quite a problem, especially when you arrive at a new place and have, with an acceptable reason, missed almost all the induction events.

"You will receive answers if you ask questions" is probably my best advice to fellow postgraduates, based on what minuscule experience I have. On deciding to spend a year in Canterbury to study, I had three goals in mind: to achieve my maximum academic potential; to equip myself for employment afterwards; and to properly immerse myself in what the student community has to offer. Despite missing Welcome Week, I found that if I posed my queries to my tutors, the Students’ Union and my colleagues, I amassed enough information to get on with everyday life. So if you have any worries about the year ahead, don’t be afraid to speak to somebody about them.

Jia-Ou Song
MSc Science, Communication and Society
Value of PhD Research Conference 2010 at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor

I attended the Value of PhD Research Conference held at Cumberland Lodge, Windsor in August 2010. Cumberland Lodge is an educational charity that occupies a beautiful 17th-century mansion. The Conference is an annual event aimed at giving participants an opportunity to step back from their research commitments and think about the wider implications of their work. My visit was funded by the Graduate School.

The Conference began with an address by the Principal of the Lodge, Dr Alastair Niven, which gave an overview of the agenda of the Conference and urged us to think about our working connection to the wider society. Other speakers were Dr Owen Gower, Senior Fellow at the Lodge and Pam Tatlow from the think-tank, million+.

Participants were then divided into groups for timed exercises in writing funding applications for interdisciplinary research projects. The submission of my group was chosen by the organisers as the best entry. After dinner we attended a talk by Dr Niven about the challenges and opportunities that shaped his own academic career.

The next three days were interspersed with facilitated group sessions where we presented our work to non-specialists and got feedback about the content and style of the presentations. We had three sessions, one on each day, with former PhD students at different stages of their professional lives about their experiences after their studies. The Conference also had specialist skills training workshops on Presentation Skills, Writing Grant Applications, Interview Skills and Writing Job Applications for Academic and Non-Academic Jobs.

A one-actor play, Galileo, directed by Nic Young and was brilliantly performed for us by Tim Hardy. It reminded me of how priceless the freedom to research and to share the results without fear actually is – something we often take for granted.

Our stay in the lovely rooms of the Mews, the delicious food, the group walk to the beautiful Savill Garden and the after-dinner Revue all added to the relaxed and informal ambience of the event. It gave the participants time and space to think about the wider implications of their work. The experience has changed my perception of what I am doing as a researcher and why; and it is a change for the good.

Madhumanti Mukherjee
PhD Law

From my perspective as a Film Studies student, I am interested in cinema that reflects current affairs, which is perhaps my way of trying to understand the world. This is England comes to mind; the British film which is set in the 80s, and follows a young boy who becomes attached to a group of friendly skinheads. Problems arise when white nationalist skinheads sabotage the skinhead alternative culture. The director, Shane Meadows, biased the film and the main character on his own experiences growing up in the Midlands.

The sequel, a televised series called This is England 86, has already been shown on Channel 4. Set three years after the first film, it documents the next chapter in the life of these working class youths. I have always valued realist work like this. It is refreshing after the mostly pitiful current television. The strong Northern working class accents, the Mohican haircuts, the 80s fashion, the relaxed casual acting and Meadows’ preference for improvisation and encouragement to get his actors to research and get into the part – all of these elements combine to form the intelligent way he examines the impact of Margaret Thatcher, both socially and domestically. Actress Vicky McClure (who plays ‘Lol’) said in an interview with The Guardian that “we had to go to some really dark places to make it real, and do it justice”. And Joseph Gilgun (who plays ‘Woody’) said in an interview: “The kids of the 80s aren’t dissimilar to the kids now.”

I would recommend anyone to watch the rest of Shane Meadows’ collection of films. In a difficult period for everyone, especially the young generation whose futures are on the line, watching Meadows’ work is a way of understanding what is going on now, even if it is also a film of the past. As Richard Armstrong says about British social realist cinema, it has “shown us to ourselves, pushing the boundaries in the effort to put the experiences of real Britons on the screen”.

Kelly O’Neil
MA Film Studies
Postgraduate Student Surveys 2011: Student Prize-winners

What is postgraduate study at Kent like? Have your say and make your view count.

These students took part in the PG Student Surveys in 2010 and were the lucky Prize-winners!

Alex Waters from Economics won a Sony Vaio laptop, and the following students won a £50 Blackwells gift card: Kylie Grant (School of English), Chayongkorn Sngprasong (SEDA), Aderonke Peters (Law), Gururzela Guillera-Arroita (SMSAS), Alexander Macleod (SEDA), Stephanie Howard (Kent Business School), Laure Cugniere (School of Anthropology and Conservation), Stone Fitzgerald (SECL), Nabpoo Chaiwisuttikul (Kent Law School), Gotzone Garay-Barayazarra (School of Anthropology and Conservation).

The prizes were presented to the winning students by Professor Diane Houston, Dean of the Graduate School.

(Mis)Adventures of a Postgrad: Rollercoaster

As a very wise friend of mine always tells me, a PhD is ‘all about the journey.’ A journey that is littered with dizzying highs, frightening lows and dark tunnels (with no visible escape), rather like a rollercoaster! A theory that sounded quite mental and/or wine-induced at first but now, three years in, I’m inclined to agree with. When results are coming along nicely, all is calm and happy, then things go awry and the darkness descends. There will always be a time when all motivation has deserted you and the work ahead seems endless, until the next experiment starts working and all is light again.

So whether you are queuing up at the entrance or at the final stomach churning loop-the-loop (or ‘viva’ if you will), take time to appreciate how far you have come/will go. It’s a long old journey, but hopefully it will be nice when we get there so keep on truckin’!

Anonymous

PG Snapshots

If you would like to appear in next edition’s PG Snapshot, please email us at grad-editors@kent.ac.uk

Name: Kelly O’Neill
Course: MA in Taught Film Studies (theory)
Academic interests: Specifically... Godard, Almodovar, Dario Argento
Academic hero: The first cahiers du cinema writers
Favourite thing about being a postgraduate student at Kent: Being part of the Film Department – the staff are such an eclectic and yet scarcely intelligent bunch
Top tip for PG study: You’ve got to be into what you’re doing because it’s pretty intense

Name: Marion Auclair
Course: LLM in International Law with International Relations
Academic interest: Human rights, in particular women rights, in Asia
Favourite thing about being a postgraduate student at Kent: Actually doing what I like, going to interesting lectures and seminars (at last) and enjoying postgraduate-only facilities such as our computer room. No more queuing in the library!
Top tip for PG study: Don’t be shy, raise your voice and join discussion groups to exchange ideas, even with PhD students!

Name: Tom Brown
Course: MA in Creative Writing
Academic hero: Jack Kerouac, minus the alcoholism
Top tip for PG study: Make friends with people of all ilks; not only is it fascinating but you never know when a free room in Istanbul might come in handy