A newsletter created by postgraduates for postgraduates
It’s almost mid-year, and so much has happened. The revolutions in North Africa, the devastating earthquake and tsunami in Japan and, right here in Britain, we are slowly getting to grips with the after-effects of government cuts. Students and workers have peacefully demonstrated to express their discontentment.

I am a football fan (my friends tease me because my favourite team Arsenal still fails to assert itself as the champion). Summer always seems to go on forever because the English Premier League will be on its annual break. But, never mind my football craze, there is always so much going on in the summer on campus. While some students will be sitting for exams, many others (if not everyone) will be working on their final projects and dissertations. Work hard but whenever you get the chance, take time to enjoy the beautiful weather too. The Graduate Student Association will have a lot of activities planned, so look out for those opportunities to let off steam and interact with your peers.

If there is one thing that I have treasured most about my time at Kent, it is the vibrant student community. I have enjoyed intellectual discussions with friends in K-Bar and the many out-of-class informal ‘seminar’ groups on various life subjects. Sometimes you learn so much more just by sharing experiences. And Kent is such a good place for student experiences to merge.

Adieu!

Tinashe Mushakavanhu
Chief GradPost Editor

The Editorial Team
Tinashe Mushakavanhu – Chief GradPost Editor (PhD English)
Kate Rees (PhD Pharmacology)
Chris Costa (PhD Medical Imaging)
Marion Auclair (LLM International Law with International Relations)
Tom Brown (MA Creative Writing)
Kelly O’Neill (MA Film Studies)
Neil van Beinum (MSc Computer Science)
Jia-Ou Song (MSc Science, Communication and Society)

Graduate School
Ros Beeching, Graduate School Co-ordinator
Suzie Taylor, Graduate School Administration Manager

Contributors
Sophie Baldock; Diane Heath; Lorna Keane; Emma O’Driscoll.

Production
Design and layout: Design & Print Centre

Kent at Paris: beauty in the eye of the beholder

To be given the opportunity to study and live in Paris is a dream come true. And to be honest, it is just that. Knowing that you can take a break from your studies and stroll the Paris streets brings on a feeling of surrealism. Yet, the large elephant that is expense persistently follows you wherever you go. It’s true that one can’t expect such a fascinating and bustling world centre to come cheap, and it certainly does not.

Not only is accommodation expensive but even a small glass of beer in one of Paris’s legendary cafés, meant intently for sitting and watching the world go by, can leave quite a dent in your purse. Yet, in saying all of that, I have to admit that for me it’s worth every penny. Whether you call yourself a romantic or not, there’s no denying the romantic air that hovers over the entire city. From the blinding lights of the Eiffel Tower, to the magnificently daring Notre Dame, a stroll through the bustling ‘Quartier Latin’, the breathtaking Sacré Coeur, and up through the artists’ district within Montmartre with its deliciously coloured streets.

It’s easy to turn into a hopeless romantic, eyes gaping wide, in mesmerised awe that such a city truly exists. This energy is heightened all the more by the aptly Paris-themed literature and film course that is studied as part and parcel of the Paris at Kent programme. We get a glimpse into the writings of some of the French greats, metres from their burial places, and also study Paris films that dominated it in the early years. One can’t help but feel desperately connected and somehow a part of this transformation into modernity that took hold of the city some years back.

There’s also another side to Paris that many seem to forget in the whirlwind of excitement. There is a desperate poverty that also lingers around the streets of Paris, abandoned within this bustling city of lights and pushed aside, much like the hidden ‘banlieues’ that surround the city highlighting the sad fact that beauty rests in the eye of the beholder. Yet, with Paris, it’s important to take the good with the bad to see it in all its glory and I plan to explore every part of the city (the good and bad), within three short months – and the daunting question remains, can it be done?

Lorna Keane
MA Modern French Studies
Reflections: becoming an anthropologist

Anthropology isn’t just a subject, it’s a vocation. The sheer diversity of backgrounds that make up any cohort of graduate students never fails to surprise me: economists, historians, geographers, archaeologists, philosophers, political scientists, psychologists, linguists and, even in one case, a neuroscientist. Yet we are drawn together by the same desire: to advance our understanding of humankind in all its aspects.

I always knew that I would apply for a PhD in Social Anthropology at Kent. Many of my most inspiring teachers began their careers here, and the School’s reputation is reflected in the research and publication record of the faculty. With the support of my supervisor, Daniela Peluso, I applied for funding from the Economic and Social Research Council to study indigenous rural-urban migration in the Ecuadorian Amazon. I was recently awarded an additional nine months’ funding for training in the language of my fieldsite.

Indigenous peoples in Amazonia are generally considered to be those whose arrival in the region predates that of European colonists. Western perceptions of these indigenous peoples are often romanticised and stereotyped. We tend to imagine isolated, primordial tribes: body paint, feathers and exotic-sounding languages spring to mind. For an Amazonian to discard these cultural markers, don Western clothes and embark upon a life in the city is inconceivable: he or she can no longer be considered indigenous. The death knell for indigenous culture has sounded many times over the last century, as population decline and acculturation diminished the number of people who satisfied the prescribed Western notions of what it means to be indigenous.

This being the case, what do we make of the increasing numbers of Ecuadorians who identify as indigenous, despite the discrimination they experience as a result? How do we reconcile the fact that many of these self-identifying indigenous people wear jeans, speak Spanish, watch television and work in cities while at the same time maintaining strong ties with their communities in the rainforest? Do these urban migrants contradict the presumed attachment between indigenous ancestral territory and culture? If so, do we need to revise our understanding of what it means to be indigenous?

These are some of the questions that I hope to answer in the course of my research. I will be spending nearly two years in Puyo, a town on the frontier of the Amazon rainforest in Ecuador, living and working with Shuar migrants. The Shuar are the largest ethnic groups in the Ecuadorian Amazon, famous for being the only indigenous peoples in Ecuador not to have been defeated by the Spanish conquistadores. I will study the Shuar language, participate in the daily activities of my informants, record their life histories and travel with them to their villages of origin. I hope to challenge clichéd perceptions of indigenous people as well as broaden our understanding of what it means to be indigenous.

Emma O’Driscoll
PhD Anthropology

Graduate Student Association

Since the last edition of the GradPost, your Graduate Student Association has been working tirelessly to cater to your needs as postgraduate students here at the University of Kent.

Claire Powell (Events Officer) has been working non-stop to ensure that we are providing you with events that you want, when you want them. With the feedback from the Events Survey, which was sent out to all postgraduates via email, Claire has collated lots of your ideas for events and day trips. She has re-jigged our events planner to incorporate all the ideas you fed back to us – so a huge thank you to everyone who filled in the survey.

On the 31st of March, we held a Live Music and DJ event in The Attic on the Canterbury campus. We had a great turnout and The Attic are looking forward to helping us run this event more regularly. Once again, we’d like to congratulate Oana and friends who won the cash prize for getting the most people in before 11pm.

On June 13th, we are helping to organise a Postgraduate Research Festival. We’d like to encourage all of you to get involved in this opportunity to present your ideas and research to academics as well as your peers in an informal and relaxed environment. This is a great opportunity for us as students to boost our CV’s and our employability – so we hope to see you all there!

Over the summer, we have lots of ideas in the pipeline for events in Canterbury as well as trips to go to the theatre in London and paintballing – so keep an eye on the weekly emails sent out by the Graduate School or, alternatively, email gsa@kent.ac.uk to be added to our events mailing list.

For more information, or to put forward your ideas, please email gsa@kent.ac.uk

Siobhan Morgan
Graduate Student Association President
On the other side of the mirror…

I had often read or heard stories about volunteering and people leading extraordinary lives helping others. And I had often wondered about first impressions, fears and doubts? What is behind the masks of courageous people who take the burdens of others on their shoulders?

The Dover Detainee visitorgroup is an organisation that helps people facing immigration problems and who live in the Dover Immigration Removal Centre. About 300 men live inside the old prison at Dover. When I heard about the Dover group, I was instantly attracted. As visitors, we volunteer once a week. What could be so hard about this?

So, here I was, en route to Dover for my first day, feeling quite excited. Reality slowly brings things into perspective. This is about taking on the responsibility of helping people with problems beyond their control. I did not have the time to even think about it as we were soon meeting our assigned ‘detainee’. At this point, I got scared and started doubting myself.

I don’t think the Dover Detainee Centre can be placed any higher than it is on the hill. With a beautiful view of the sea and ships, France can be seen in sunny clear weather. The view is amazing! But I am not here for that really. The view is suddenly blurred. I see barbed wires, high walls and a massive brick gate as an entrance. Yep, it is a prison! Entering the little annex serving as reception, families wait for visiting hours to begin. There are a few people with grief and worry written on their faces. They look very tired. I can’t help but feel uneasy. What are they thinking about?

I feel nervous, but I don’t say it. I can’t even bring myself to say it. Who am I to complain? I am going home at the end of the day. We walk to the gate and wait. A man opens a little door, a HUGE man, big and tall with a bunch of keys attached to a chain around his waist (picture Hagrid from the Harry Potter movies in a uniform and calling me “darling!”). Then we walk to the ‘common room’, if you can call it that as it is closed by a metallic barred door. My stomach has a mind of its own and my hands are so cold. But I am not the one waiting for my fate to be decided by someone else.

After long minutes of waiting, our detainee finally arrives. I try not to sound nervous and unsettle him. In front of me is the highest spirited person I have ever met. A man who preaches about love and believes every nightmare ends and his time here will end too. He does not complain and makes me laugh. I left, unsure about my feelings. Should I be happy or scared? Such a positive man in such a depressing place.

I sat down in front of my computer trying to decide which emotion I should stick to. I felt like crying but also smiling. I came into this man’s life and I don’t want to disappoint him or myself. I slept on it and went back three days later for a second visit. After three weeks, my fears were gone but I will always remember this experience.

Volunteering is not just about making your CV look good, it is about other people relying on you and involving yourself with their problems, sometimes too heavy to bear. It is life changing for you and them. Doubts and fears are part of this incredible human experience. It is not shameful or weak, and proves that you can feel and care. It proves that you are made for it. So, take fear by the horns!

Marion Auclair
MA International Law with International Relations
Q&A with Aaron Porter

Aaron Porter is President of the National Union of Students. His presidency has been marked by fierce debates surrounding the government’s planned cuts to university funding, and nationwide student protests and occupations. On 1 July 2011, he will be succeeded by newly elected NUS President, Liam Burns. Here, Aaron speaks to Sophie Baldock about the past year and his plans for the future.

Q: How do you think the upcoming cuts to university funding and the rise in tuition fees will affect students?

A: I’m worried that the biggest consequence for students will be that they are expected to pay considerably more for their higher education, but don’t see any improvement in what they are getting.

Worse still, the government’s desire to create a market in price is coming to light, and I believe this will force prospective students to make decisions based on price, and not academic issues.

Ultimately this could lead to some students choosing “cheaper” courses or institutions, rather than the best for them, or not going into HE altogether.

Q: Postgraduate students have largely been left out of the fees debate, yet the new funding system will mean a steep rise in their tuition fees with no extra financial support. How does the NUS plan to tackle this in the future?

A: NUS has long raised the issue of postgraduate funding, particularly the fact that access is still restricted to those who can afford it and not those with the ability.

At the very least, the government should be seriously investigating a state-backed loan for postgraduate taught students, and tighter regulation on postgraduate admissions.

Q: The fees debate has caused a split in the student body between moderates and left-wing activists, many of whom feel let down by the NUS. How do you think newly elected NUS President, Liam Burns, should seek to bridge this gap?

A: It is important that students whatever their political persuasion, or none, focus on the bigger fight. It’s obviously a challenge to unite the views of seven million members, but Liam has talked passionately about this and will look to bring different viewpoints around the table.

Q: University of Kent students held the longest student occupation in the country. What is your view on student occupations as a tool for political action?

A: Peaceful occupation within the law is obviously one tactic among many that are available to students. Personally, I rarely consider it to be the most effective, but I respect those who wish to pursue it.

Q: How can students who currently feel disillusioned after the failure to stop the rise in tuition fees make their voices heard?

A: Students and supporters need to continue to build pressure on the Coalition to ensure that this decision is revisited in future, and importantly punish any politicians they feel have let you down at the ballot box. There can be no explanation for such a blatant promise being broken.

In the longer term, I think students have an important role to play in making the case for public funding in higher education, and we might start to see a reversal to some of the unprecedented cuts universities have faced recently.

Q: Your presidency has been dominated by debates surrounding funding cuts and tuition fees. Are there other important issues affecting students that you think were obscured or ignored?

A: It is right that my tenure has been largely dominated by higher education funding, and even that has been overshadowed by a narrow focus on full-time undergraduate fees rather than a bigger appreciation of higher education funding more generally; namely postgraduate and part-time students.

Other big issues have included recent proposed changes to international student immigration and the ongoing funding of the further education sector.

Q: What were your best and worst moments as NUS President?

A: The proudest was leading the 50 000 students who came to London for a peaceful protest. This was no mean feat and the biggest student demonstration for generations. Alongside the concessions we did get from government, we can be proud that NUS has had a bigger impact on the debate than in previous times.

The worst moment was watching spineless Liberal Democrats break a simple pledge. It was insulting to see some side with David Cameron and the Coalition over the people who voted for them. I hope they are punished at the ballot box when the next opportunity presents itself.

Q: What do you plan to do next?

A: It’ll be hard to match this year, whatever I do. My plan before student politics was journalism and I’m looking to pursue a few ideas in this field. I also care passionately about higher education, and education more generally, and would be interested in doing some projects in the sector on a consultancy basis.

Sophie Baldock
‘...a blood red curtain for the high altar’: confraternity and gift-giving in late medieval Canterbury

On the night of April 20th 1508, the doors of Canterbury Cathedral were locked shut and then, watched over by Archbishop Warham and Prior Goldstone, in a scene of dark and macabre splendour, the monks smashed open the tomb at the altar of St Dunstan. How does this exhumation tie in with the Contents List of Brother Richard Stone’s bedchamber, from Christ Church Cathedral Priory in Canterbury? And how do both speak to gift-giving and material culture?

There are two items in Richard’s inventory that are connected to that eerie exhumation: one of the 45 books in his room, his own work on the patron saints of the Cathedral, (now Lambeth Palace, London Ms 1550); and secondly, his curtain for the high altar illustrated with scenes from the history of St Dunstan. These items were particular gifts of confraternity, for remembrance and for the good of his soul.

In his ‘newly written quires’, Richard celebrates the patron saints of the Cathedral, beginning with St Dunstan. However, it is the pages inserted before Richard Stone’s work that are key here. They contain the report of the exhumation (called a scrutiny) of Dunstan’s tomb by Archbishop Warham on 20th April 1508, probably added by James Hartley who wrote his name in large black letters on f.1v and refer to the renewed claims of the Abbot of Glastonbury, who had put up a new shrine complete with a silver head of Dunstan. It was to prove outright that Canterbury indeed had all of St. Dunstan’s body, that the Archbishop of Canterbury and Prior Goldstone had ordered Dunstan’s Canterbury tomb to be opened. So we return to the darkened cathedral:

“Opening this Coffin, they found ... the Body; ... for the most part... wasted, [but the] skull was very sound: Which being kissed by the Archbishop and the rest of the Convent, with wondrous devotion was delivered to the Prior to be set in Silver and put among the Reliques.”

To the Canterbury monks, it was clear that St Dunstan had been reclaimed for their Cathedral, his rightful and now [second] silver-encased head given to them by their own archbishop. Richard Stone might have been one of the ‘several other venerable men of the Church’, who attended the scene. The second item, the embroidered curtain, then becomes a much more personal gift than previously recognised. Richard had already given an apt confraternal gift in 1506; another curtain embroidered with ten golden fleur de lys for St Dunstan’s shrine, duly entered in William Ingram’s list of shrine furnishings, but this new one was for the high altar and perhaps was embroidered by Richard himself since there was a box of skeins in his cell. Following the scrutiny, his book and second curtain are both to become death-kissed gifts of intense devotion.

In conclusion, at the nexus of death and giving, objects are becoming; neither solely commodities, nor purely confraternal objects of piety, but imbued with symbolic and ritual significance of the rites of death, transferring and bearing religious piety, communal glory and deeply personal emotional meanings. I like the idea of Margareta de Grazia in Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture that ‘the beloved object intimated death’ and connecting that concept to this inventory of goods, owned by someone yearning for heavenly release, which includes his book commemorating the earthly glory of his convent, and also his sublime curtain of St. Dunstan’s life for the high altar.

Diane Heath
I am a postgraduate research student at the Centre for Medieval and Early Modern Studies (MEMS), studying the bestiary and didactic culture in medieval Canterbury monasteries. This piece is taken from a paper prepared for a MEMS panel on material culture and gift-giving in Canterbury held at the Society of Renaissance Studies 4th Biennial Conference in York last year. Its gothic theme is in honour of the new postgraduate short story reading group which focused on horror stories this week.

We’d like your feedback

The GradPost is a student-run initiative – if you are passionate about writing or copy-editing, then here is your chance to come along to our meetings and be part of this exciting venture. There isn’t too much pressure, its fun and educational.

We thank you again for your continued feedback on the GradPost. With every issue, we strive to grow bigger than the last. I hope you will enjoy discovering what others are researching, volunteering experiences and insightful interviews. We intend to introduce a feedback section in our subsequent issues, so please email your feedback on the articles you read or other issues that could be of interest to our postgraduate community to grad-editors@kent.ac.uk

If you will still be here next year, here is an invitation to come along to our next meeting and be part of the next GradPost team. Write to us on grad-editors@kent.ac.uk

The Editorial Collective

Postgraduate Taught Student Survey 2011

It’s not too late to have your say and make your views count.

The national Postgraduate Taught Experience Survey (PTES) for postgraduate taught students closes on 31st May.

All postgraduate students will receive an email inviting them to complete the survey – if you complete the survey, you can enter into the prize draw to win one of three iPad Nanos.

(Notes: the Postgraduate Research Experience Survey closed on 17th May).