



Postgraduate Studies in Oxford

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Postgraduate Studies in Oxford

Isaiah Berlin and H. L. A. Hart

University of Oxford, Commission of Inquiry ['The Franks Commission']: *Evidence*, part 11, *Individuals* (Oxford, 1965: Oxford University Press), 12–16

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Postgraduate Studies in Oxford

1. Postgraduate studies were the subject of a Report made to the General Board in Trinity Term 1962 (hereinafter referred to as the Report), and of Comments on that Report made by the General Board and published in a supplement to the *University Gazette* in February 1964 (hereinafter referred to as the Comments). We are in general agreement with the views expressed in these documents, which plainly recognized that more thought should be given to the intellectual and social needs of graduate students. Our suggestions, however, in some respects go further than the recommendations of the Report, and we differ in emphasis on certain points. Where the Comments differ from the Report we prefer the views expressed in the Comments. We volunteer nothing about graduate students in the natural sciences, about which we are not competent to speak.

1. Postgraduate studies were the subject of a Report made to the General Board in Trinity Term 1962 (hereinafter referred to as the Report), and of Comments on that Report made by the General Board and published in a supplement to the *University Gazette* in February 1964 (hereinafter referred to as Comments). We are in general agreement with the views expressed in these documents, which plainly recognised that more thought should be given to the intellectual and social needs of graduate students. Our suggestions, however, in some respects go further than the recommendations of the Report, and we differ in emphasis on certain points. Where the Comments differ from the Report we prefer the views expressed in the Comments. We volunteer nothing about graduate students in the natural sciences, about which we are not competent to speak.

2. Postgraduate students are a late development in this University, and graduate students have tended to be looked upon as a somewhat artificial addendum to an institution primarily geared to undergraduate studies, rather than as an activity of importance equal to that of the teaching of undergraduates and presenting difficult problems of its own. Consequently, as the Report itself makes clear, there has been a tendency to let DPhil and BLitt students largely

fend for themselves, perhaps in the mistaken belief that since they must be assumed to be mature enough to think for themselves they could also safely be left to pursue their own studies according to their own lights, in isolation from each other, and with only occasional help from supervisors. In our experience this isolation [13] has proved to be bad, both intellectually and psychologically, for DPhil and BLitt students, especially for those who do not enjoy the benefits of graduate communities such as Nuffield College and St Antony's. On the other hand, BPhil students, to whose needs more thought has been devoted, are, after initial neglect in some fields, now adequately looked after: they are in more systematic touch with supervisors than other graduates, and are unified by work for a common examination and the classes and seminars that are provided for them, at any rate in such subjects as Philosophy, Politics, and Economics. The same is true of BCL students.

3. One possible form of provision for the growing number of graduates is the formation of a separate Graduate School for arts students. This would be a centralised university body, directed by a Dean of Graduate Studies with the assistance of officials and office staff. The Report (para. 25) mentions and rejects the system of placing graduate studies under a special board; though we do not think the idea of a Graduate School should be rejected out of hand, we think there are serious objections to it. It would be generally incompatible with the federal structure (both as to faculties and to colleges) of this University; it would tend to cut the University in two and to absorb into itself too much of the attention of professors and readers and some university lecturers, who would become specialised teachers of postgraduates. For these reasons we prefer the solution adopted by the Report (para. 49). This is to treat responsibility for graduate students as primarily a matter for faculty boards, to be discharged largely through a committee for graduate studies to be set up by each faculty board. This committee might well be identical in composition and mode of selection with the present applications committee, strengthened and improved in the manner suggested in para. 49 of the Report.

4. In addition to the admission of graduate students, the committees so set up should be responsible for the continuing supervision of graduate studies within the field of their board. They would receive

reports from supervisors and also consider any representation made by students themselves in connection with their studies and general needs. On the basis of such information, they could make recommendations to the board concerning individual students, changes in the courses of research, the suspension of unsatisfactory students, and the issue of preliminary warnings where these seemed advisable.

We consider also that the committees should in proper cases enable the graduate student to change his supervisor. The fact that some supervisors are more conscientious or interested or gifted than others is not likely to alter under any educational system. But it should be possible to make the student less directly dependent upon these differences of quality than he is in Oxford today. Accordingly, we suggest that a student should be permitted to change his supervisor in mid-course, or even quite early in his career, if the committee of his board think his wish to do so reasonable. For this purpose it might be necessary to provide that a student could, in the first instance, lay his case before any one member of the committee, who would present his case to the committee and would also be charged with the task of tactfully arranging the transfer if the committee agrees to it. This would be carried out more satisfactorily by such a person than by the 'College tutor' (Report, para. 53). We agree entirely with the views of the CAS (Comment, p. 10).

5. The committee should, however, also discharge certain wider functions, among them that of arranging the provision of seminars and classes not only for BPhil students but for graduate students in general. The importance of these is rightly stressed in section 44 of the Report as a means of diminishing the isolation, not only social but academic and intellectual, in which many graduate students, [14] especially those from abroad, often live. Such graduate seminars and classes should chiefly be conducted by professors and readers and to a smaller extent by other senior members of faculties, university lecturers in special subjects, etc. Though it is true that the topics of graduate students' research are heterogeneous, classes and seminars on central topics of interest and use to students researching in the same general field can be organised more frequently than is done at present. No doubt this is easier in philosophy, economics, and related subjects, where issues tend to be more closely interconnected than they are in such subjects as history, modern languages, English, or law. None the less, even in the latter fields the effort to organise

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classes on topics designed to bring specialists together would be well rewarded: it would tend to unite the intellectual interests of teachers and students; it would bring students more closely together; and it would help to direct the attention of students to fields in which Oxford scholars have much rather than little to offer.

At the same time it will be necessary to guard against the danger that students may be over-directed by supervisors and led into subjects of interest to the supervisors themselves but of less interest or profit to the students. The temptation to obtain graduate students as aids to the professors' research has perhaps been more successfully avoided at Oxford and Cambridge than at any other great university. One of the functions of the committee should be to note and remedy any excessive regimentation or direction of research to suit a particular professor's interests or the intellectual fashions prevailing, however justifiably, among a particular group of teachers.

6. We believe that at the present time there is a greater tendency to narrow than to widen unduly the fields of research open to students. No doubt there are and always will be certain subjects for which Oxford cannot cater, and we are inevitably compelled to reject applications from students who wish to study subjects for which we can provide neither qualified supervisors nor examiners. None the less, if we are to preserve our reputation as a great international centre of learning, we must not turn away students because they wish to pursue a branch of a serious subject which may not be fashionable in Oxford at the time, or in which our scholars happen at the time to feel insufficient curiosity. We think, on the contrary, that the widening of knowledge and interests in response to a reasonable demand would be good thing. There is no reason why teachers should not be stimulated to extend their range of studies so as to enable them to cater for postgraduates who wish to pursue research outside the rather severely demarcated range which in some faculties is considered sufficient. A student who wishes, for example, to study the philosophy (other than political) of Hegel or Nietzsche, or of any French thinker other than Descartes (and possibly Sartre), or the history of aesthetic theory, or, to turn to other fields, of German radicalism or the French Enlightenment, or comparative literature, or Tax Law or Muslim Law, could not, so far as we can tell, be adequately supervised in Oxford at the moment.

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The fact that no one in Oxford ‘knows or cares’ (Report, para. 38) about such fields does not seem to us a matter for complacency. We suggest that it should be one of the responsibilities of the committees of each board to record those cases where students have been turned away simply because the subject of research lay outside the usual range, and that one legitimate ground for subsidising teachers or colleges should be their readiness to cater for serious needs discovered in this way. We therefore dissent strongly from the opinion expressed in the Report (para. 45).

7. We very much support that attitude of the General Board expressed on p. 4 of its Comments in regard to the topic of ‘wastage’, and we agree that an enforced abridgement of time for research would on the whole be an evil. Indeed, although it is obviously undesirable that irresponsible or insufficiently well qualified [15] students should embark on courses that they are not likely to complete, we should encourage adequately qualified foreign students to come to Oxford and attend seminars and classes even if they have no intention to complete a degree. Foreign students, especially those from North America, have in our view proved to be a more valuable stimulus to graduate studies (e.g. in the field of social studies) than any other single factor, and a certain number of passengers and tourists is a price we should expect to pay for encouraging a variety of interests and an international approach to learning.

8. If the senior teachers of the University, especially professors and readers, are to supervise adequately a growing number of research students and supply the seminars and classes which are desirable, the burden of lectures should be eased considerably. In spite of the adverse vote of Congregation some terms ago, we are of the opinion that professors and readers should have greater latitude in substituting classes and seminars for lectures. We recommend that the minimum number of required lectures should be reduced from 28 to 16 per annum, but that the total minimum of both lectures and classes should be increased from its present figure of 36 per annum to 42 or 48. It is now commonly recognised that the number of lectures in the humanities at Oxford is probably too great, and the arrangement we recommend, though it would increase the total

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amount of work demanded by professors and readers, would canalise it in directions where it is more urgently required.

9. We think well of the idea of a graduate centre recommended in para. 52 of the Report, and we think that senior members of the University might be encouraged to use its facilities as a means of pulling together graduates and dons.

10. We would like finally to make some observations not strictly connected with the subject of postgraduate studies. It would, in our view, add much to the intellectual life of British universities if interchanges of teachers at all levels could be organised on a more systematic and regular basis than at present. A term or two terms, or even a year, at another British university would be immensely beneficial to both teachers and students. The waters of many a stagnant pool would be stirred by exposure to currents from another source. It is an excellent thing that many teachers at Oxford pay visits to American universities, but there is no reason why English universities should not also profit by temporary internal migrations. The financial difficulties would not be great, and we consider that the college and tutorial system could well accommodate such exchanges.

11. Research students, at times British but more often foreign, who find themselves in financial difficulty are obliged to discontinue their course of study on account of this. We suggest that it might be useful to create a Loan Fund (such as operates successfully at Harvard University) for subvention to such students; this would entail making arrangements for repayment over an extended period of time. Although there is naturally some danger of the incurrence of bad debts, this should be more than compensated for by free contributions to the Fund, which could be encouraged, and by the value of the service rendered by it. Colleges as well as individuals could be invited to contribute – the sums would not need to be at all high.

12. In order to facilitate research, not so much by graduate students as by dons, machinery could be devised whereby the richer colleges formed a consortium to which they could assign specific funds for the purpose of subsidising research projects or the publication costs

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of senior members of the University. If a *bona fide* piece of research were held up by tutorial [16] lecturing, or administrative duties, a sum of money could be paid to the relevant college or institution, enabling it to pay for substitute teaching, administration, etc. and liberating the researcher – who would retain his normal salary – for a specified period of time, say three to five years (as a maximum). The size of the fund, and therefore the number of applicants that could be satisfied, would probably vary from year to year; but this is no argument against its utility.

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