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An Introduction to Researching Student Lives: Methodological and Theoretical Perspectives

Georgina Brewis [a], Jodi Burkett [b] and Sarah Crook [c]

[a]UCL Insitute of Education, University College London, London, UK; [b]School of Area Studies, Societology, History, Politics and Literature, University of Portsmouth, Portsmouth, UK; [c]School of Culture and Communication, Swansea University, Swansea, UK

ABSTRACT

The last decade has witnessed a flourishing of research on student lives and student experiences around the world, transforming how we see higher education history within its social and cultural context. This introductory article provides a discussion of recent literature and historiographical trends in student histories outlining key methodological approaches. We explore how historians can grapple with the ephemerality of this material, with the shifting constellation of students involved with developing it, and with the variability of archival practices across institutions.

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While just a decade ago historians might be justified in lamenting a lack of scholarly engagement with student histories, this is no longer the case. There has been a flourishing of research on student lives and student experiences around the world, transforming how we see higher education history.[1] Such work has drawn extensively on oral histories of alumni or sought out student-produced archival material to deepen our understanding of how students navigated university and college life, as well as how they reflected upon broader social, cultural and political shifts.[2] The collection of articles that form this special issue was prompted by a renewed sense of urgency in drawing together perspectives on the varied uses of such student-produced material. This impulse emerged from three concerns: first, from the apparent historiographical growth in the use of this material across social, cultural and political history. Second, and relatedly, from an awareness that universities and students' unions are increasingly being prompted to examine their own records and archival holdings and, in some cases, to digitise historical student-produced materials and make them available online – how these materials might be used, then, has implications for these archival processes. Third, from an awareness that within the academy contemporary student experiences are subject to concerted research – generating material that will no doubt be used by historians of the future. In

CONTACT Sarah Crook s.r.e.crook@swansea.ac.uk School of Culture and Communication, Swansea University, James Callaghan Building, Singleton Campus, Swansea SA2 8PZ, UK

[1]Burkett, ed., *Students in Twentieth-Century Britain*; Gevers and Vos, "Student Movements"; Sharp, "Students in Britain and Ireland."; Brewis and Blaxland, *Student London*.

[2]Blaxland, *Swansea University;* Dockerill, "Forgotten voices."

an era in which the 'student voice' is – at least nominally – lauded in higher education institutions, it is useful for historians to think collaboratively about student voices from the past, and to work together to think about how student-produced materials might give voice to critical, marginalised, contentious or prophetic perspectives on education, politics, youth, sexuality, health, welfare and the very purpose of the university.

This introductory article provides a discussion of recent literature and historiographical trends in student histories before outlining the different methodological approaches discussed in more detail in the subsequent articles, including oral history, student media, and material culture. The article examines the challenges of archiving student activities and student organisations and working with the partial traces left by students. As editors of this special issue, we suggest it is timely to consider the methodological, ethical, and conceptual issues that this material presents us with: how can historians grapple with the ephemerality of this material, with the shifting constellation of students involved with developing it, and with the variability of archival practices across institutions? How can the breadth of approaches taken by historians – oral histories, archival research, student-produced media, the use of historical social science materials, examination of material culture – be harnessed to best effect as we seek to understand the ways in which higher education has changed, and has been changed by, the evolving and treacherous terrain of personal and national histories? How do these student-produced materials amplify or undermine ideas about past student lives around the world?

Literature on student life

Scholars have increasingly come to view university and college students as important subjects for historical inquiry, marking a clear move away from earlier studies of higher education that tended to neglect students.[3] Although a small minority of the age group in most nations until well into the twentieth century, for Daniel Laqua, the significance of researching university and college students before 1945 lies in the fact they were 'political and intellectual leaders in the making'.[4] As higher education expanded worldwide in the twentieth century, students remained in the vanguard of many social, cultural and political movements,[5] while people involved in students' unions have made important later contributions to civil society, politics, journalism, business, and higher education.[6] Research focused on protest and political movements, anti-racist activism,[7] and transnational solidarity and international organisation[8] has more recently shifted both to 'decolonise' earlier representations of student protest[9] and to explore the more 'everyday' aspects of student life in the past. For example, new work has looked at student finance and funding,[10] living arrangements and leisure,[11] health and well-being,[12] and

[3]Burkett, "Introduction," 4; and Hotelano et al., *They Live*.
[4]Laqua, "Activism," 607.
[5]Chapman, *Student Resistance to Apartheid*.
[6]Brewis, *Social History*; and Day and Dickinson, *David Vs Goliath*, 9.
[7]Hoefferle, *British Student Activism*; Burkett, *Post-Imperial Britain*; Macdonald, "To Form Citizens"; Thomas, "Challenging Myths."
[8]Burkett, "Transnational Solidarity"; and Daniel Laqua, "Activism."
[9]Hendrickson, *Decolonising 1968*.
[10]Brewis et al, "Rebuilding the Universities."
[11]Hamlett, "Nicely Feminine, Yet Learned"; and Whyte, *Redbrick*.
[12]Crook, "Historicising the 'Crisis'"; Gidney, *Tending*.

associational culture, social service and voluntary action.[13] Scholarship has examined gender, relationships, sex and sexuality among the student body, including the gay rights activism pioneered by student movements.[14] Engagement with histories of same-sex desire at universities and colleges is now increasingly 'open to non-binary and ambiguous patterns of identity and desire', but thus far such research has tended to focus on the ancient universities of Oxford and Cambridge in the UK, or elite institutions such as Vassar in the US.[15] There has also been some limited attention paid to student life in higher education institutions other than universities, including teacher education colleges and art schools or what were called 'polytechnics' or 'mechanics institutes' in the UK or 'community colleges' in the US.[16] Taking this further, Heather Ellis suggests we must look beyond formal higher education institutions and makes the case for 'the importance of learned societies and academies as sites of research development and training in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries'.[17]

Over the past two decades, much new scholarship has explored the intimate connections between US universities and their students and slavery.[18] Elsewhere the imperial histories of higher education institutions and the colonial legacies facing universities and colleges have been much discussed.[19] Studies have explored student mobility and patterns of student migration, such as the imperial networks that criss-crossed the British world or the Francophone empire.[20] Work examines diasporic and migrant student communities including the associational cultures forged by Chinese students in the UK, US, France and Germany,[21] the experiences of African students in East Germany and France,[22] and students from the Indian subcontinent or West Africa in the UK.[23] Particular time periods have also come under scrutiny, including research focusing on the role of students in the reconstruction of cultural and intellectual life after the Great War in Europe and America, together with the previously neglected contributions of student associations to interwar internationalism.[24] The histories of students, student movements, national and local students' unions can add immensely to our understanding of locality and place, as well as contributing to our understanding of some of the biggest issues affecting modern societies including the changing nature of political ideas and involvement, imperial legacies and decolonisation, changing norms around gender and sexuality, and ideas about class and race.

[13]Brewis, *Social History*; Field, 'Service Learning'; and Howard and Gallogly, *Society Ties*.
[14]Dyhouse, *Students*; Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*; Malcolm, "Curious Courage"; and McDonagh, "Homosexuality Is Not a Problem."
[15]Janes, "The 'Curious Effects' of Acting", 174; Brooks, "Beyond Brideshead"; and MacKay, *Wolfgirls at Vassar*.
[16]Bourke, *Birkbeck*; Edwards, *Teacher Training Colleges*; Spencer et al. *Alumni Voices*; See also new research on former women's teacher training college, now Edge Hill University, https://sites.edgehill.ac.uk/researchcatalyst/.
[17]Ellis, "Beyond the University."
[18]Wilder, *Ebony and Ivory*; Clarke and Fine, "'A' for apology."
[19]Mullen, "British Universities and Transatlantic Slavery"; Waghorne, "Different Forms of Friendship."
[20]Perraton, *Foreign Students*; Laqua, "Transnational Student Mobility"; and Pietsch, *Empire of Scholars*; Pietsch, "Many Rhodes"; Bryant, "Social Networks and Empire."
[21]Bond and Brewis, "Ambassadors of Cultural Appreciation"; Rhoads, *Chinese Educational Mission*; Harnisch, *Chinesische Studenten in Deutschland*; and Ye, *Seeking Modernity in China's Name*.
[22]Rice, "Between Empire and Nation"; and Pugach, *African Students in East Germany*.
[23]Adi, *West Africans in Britain*; Mukherjee, *Nationalism, Education, and Migrant Identities;* Mukherjee, "Mobility, Race and the Politicisation of Indian Students"; Matera, *Black London*; Whittall, "Creating Black Places"; Lee, "Overseas Students"; Burkett, "Unity in Struggle"; and Waghorne, "Different Forms of Friendship."
[24]Laqua, "Activism"; Brewis et al., "Rebuilding the Universities"; Irish, *University at War*; and Irish, *Feeding the Mind*.

Methodological themes and issues

The articles presented here originate from papers first presented during a series of seminars organised by the editors of this special issue to mark the centenary of the National Union of Students of England and Wales (NUS) in 2022.[25] Reflecting on the centenary of the NUS we were struck both by the increased interest in writing student histories we observed, but also with the ongoing challenges of producing such histories. Many of these challenges seemed to speak to particularities of the evidence – archival, printed, material or simply remembered – that we all relied upon in producing histories of student life. We structured the seminars around different types of historical evidence, and we now turn to trace some of the larger questions that each of the events sought to explore and address.

Students in the archive

The first two pieces in this special issue speak to different aspects of the archives of student lives, activities and student organisations. Anderson's 2017 critique of university histories called attention to the challenges of the archive, noting 'Universities are long-lived bodies with rich archives for historians to exploit, but the result has often been inward-looking, focusing on administrative questions, the lives of celebrated professors or alumni, and the university's scientific and scholarly achievements'.[26] As many scholars have pointed out, students were often missing from early histories of individual institutions or higher education policy making.[27] This reflects the relatively low value accorded to students and student organisations by higher education institutions. Student lives may be captured in official university and college archives to a greater or lesser extent. Indeed, while the 'student voice' has become a key phrase within institutions of higher education, there is little concern for how these voices were or are captured and preserved for future generations of scholars. If the records of students' unions are still not routinely acquired by university archives services, still less are the memoirs, diaries, letters, photographs of individual students, or objects and material culture relating to their lives past and present.

In the main it is through the records of student organisations, including local and national students' unions, that much of our understanding of student life has been filtered. There is a stronger tradition of research on the students' union movement in Europe than in Britain.[28] Writing of the UK, Mike Day and Jim Dickinson reflected in 2018 that research was 'only beginning to make use of students' union archives'.[29] It was this challenge that prompted the editors of this special issue to design a survey of students' unions and university archive services in 2023. In the first article of this special issue, Paul Beard and Georgina Brewis offer an overview of this research into the record keeping practices of individual students' unions in the UK.[30] Arguing that students' union records have often been preserved in a 'haphazard' manner, the article argues that

[25]The seminar series was convened by Georgina Brewis, Jodi Burkett, Mike Day, Sarah Crook and Emily Sharp with the support of the NUS.
[26]Anderson, "Writing University History."
[27]Waghorne, "Student Experience."
[28]See Dhont, "Introduction"; Beard and Brewis, "Different Traditions."
[29]Day and Dickinson, *David Vs Goliath*.
[30]Beard and Brewis, "Different traditions."

they should be much more highly valued for the irreplaceable record of locally-rooted student life they contain, the counterbalance to 'official' accounts of higher educational institutions they provide, and the insights they offer into British social, cultural and political history. The second archives review piece by Emily Sharp considers the UK-wide picture, with a focus on the archival holdings of the National Union of Students UK (NUS). Based on a series of conversations with NUS historian and archive gatekeeper, Mike Day, and her own work in the NUS archives, the article offers an overview of the formation of NUS archive collections, which are distributed across the four regions of the United Kingdom. Research into student life in the UK is not complete without some consideration of the history of this significant national student body. However, Sharp argues that the current low priority accorded to records management within the NUS, and the student movement more broadly, poses risks for future historians.

There has been little thought about how born-digital material created by students can be, or should be, preserved. Perhaps even more troubling, there is little sense within students' unions that this needs to be addressed urgently. Indeed, the challenges that researchers currently experience in relation to accessing the archives of students' unions will pale in comparison to those who attempt to understand student activity in the early twenty-first century if we do not develop clear requirements for the preservation of this material quickly, particularly social media. But we would also encourage a broader view than this. We know that many students did not actively participate in their local students' union, still less in national-level unions. We therefore need to take a more expansive look at archival holdings that may have traces of students who were not active union members. Students have long been involved in causes and campaigns, recreational, sporting and leisure activities, religious organisations and businesses outside universities, and the records of charities, NGOs, community groups, sports clubs, commercial businesses, local press and other organisations contain valuable material by and about students.[31] Research into student consumer culture, for example, has made innovative use of trade directories and law court records.[32] Other less obvious sources might include census data, novels, special branch surveillance, and Mass Observation reports.[33]

Rebecca Orr's contribution to this special issue 'The Decolonising University: Oral Histories and Student-Authored Sources on the Ends of Empire in 1960s Britain' looks at the potentials and pitfalls of using the university archive to understand decolonising Britain. Taking the employment of former colonial officials in universities as its focus, the article argues that student-authored sources can usefully situate new universities within a broader socio-political context. The student press and oral histories indicate the changing attitudes of white university students and staff towards colonialism and might also be used to map student and staff mobility between Britain and its former empire. Orr further highlights the problems associated with the racialised gap in the archives of students.

Why is exploring the histories of students of such importance? As noted above, many students have gone on to have important roles in politics, business, economics or wider culture and society. Or, to put it differently, the vast majority of people who are

[31]Burkett, *Post-Imperial Britain;* and Brewis, *Social History*.
[32]Chaouche, *Student Consumer Culture*.
[33]Brewis, *Social History*, 10; Brewis and Blaxland, *Student London*; Reinarz, "Portrait of the Medical Student," 415.

prominent in these sectors today were university or college students at some point. Since the late twentieth century there has been a 'massive worldwide expansion of [higher education] institutions, curricula, and students'.[34] As a larger proportion of the population entered higher education, university and college life has become a formative life experience for more people, and from more diverse backgrounds, increasing the urgency for research into the (changing) student experience. Moreover, beyond these individual lives, looking for students in the archives of universities and colleges can help us to humanise such institutions.[35]

Memory sources: Oral history and memoir

Oral histories of higher education institutions have been richly developed by researchers from both Britain and elsewhere who have highlighted the textured, diverse, and personal experiences of staff and students. Sam Blaxland's paper in this special issue 'Oral history and student lives: opportunities and limitations' examines both the methodological and practical issues of using oral history with alumni in the writing of the histories of universities and students. Should former students be treated differently to what have traditionally been seen as 'typical' oral history subjects? How, for example, might their subsequent lives have shaped their perspectives and memories of their university experience? Callum G. Brown, Arthur J. McIvor and Neil Rafeek explained the use of oral history in their work as a means to allow the memories of students and staff to 'constitute an important and valid history' of the University of Strathclyde.[36] Brown, McIvor, and Rafeek are not alone. Undertaking oral history has created new understandings of student lives, highlighting their complexity and their variability.[37] They have also allowed historians and archivists to deepen the historical record about particular generations of students' experiences, sometimes with an acute awareness of the pressing passage of time.[38] They have also highlighted the work and campaigns of marginalised groups, including queer and LGBTQ+ campus activism.[39]

As Blaxland highlights, though, oral histories with former students also present their own methodological challenges. When institutions have hosted such extensive and varied communities, how can students' emotional and relational lives be discerned and untangled? Blaxland points out, too, that university education has been an important transition point for students, facilitating mobility between social classes, and – in some cases – moving students into what might be broadly seen to constitute an elite. How, then, are historians to navigate these points of transformation? How should social mobility be configured within oral histories of higher education, particularly when oral history's methodological origins lie in history-from-below approaches? These methodological questions are all the more pressing when it is the institution itself that is financing or otherwise supporting such research, as HEIs are increasingly doing. Indeed, Grace Huxford and Richard Wallace have argued that anniversary cultures 'are the main

[34]Watts, "Students in Higher and Further Education," 780; and Halsey, "Admission."
[35]Day, "Student Representation."
[36]Brown et al, *University Experience*, xi.
[37]Christian, "Documenting Student Life"; and Uí Chionna, *University College Galway*.
[38]Swain, "Remembering Alma Mater."
[39]Reichard, "Animating Ephemera."

motivation for conducting university oral histories and themselves form focal points or *lieux de memoire* for institutions'.[40] As Blaxland's contribution stresses, historians' approaches to the creation, appraisal and use of such oral history collections should be cognisant of the institutional drives at work in their creation.

Outside institutional histories, oral histories that have explored young peoples' experiences have also, perhaps unsurprisingly, looked particularly to moments of political and social tumult. Given this, the interest in oral histories of student protest movements and involvement in activism is understandable.[41] Such histories, though, are fraught for institutions. Hilary Young, looking at the Open University, has asked 'How does an organisation record its history when the past can represent both a golden age and criticism?' and proposed that their approach to ensuring that interviews 'covered a broad representation of experiences involved a matrix with three criteria: time, role and geography'.[42] Like other parts of this collection, the intervention around oral history is not intended to be prescriptive, but is instead intended to stimulate new conversations about the creation and use of these archives.

Other types of memory sources are also important for writing student histories. Oral history will of course be less useful for research produced today that seeks to examine student life before 1945. Such sources can include published autobiographies and biographical studies of individuals alongside unpublished memoirs or reminiscences. Just as oral history projects are often shaped by anniversary cultures, so too did centenaries and jubilees in the past prompt higher educational institutions to collect written student reminiscences. A new book on *Student London*, for example, draws on extensive sets of testimonies preserved in the archive collections of University College London, the Slade School of Fine Art and the Institute of Education. Such twentieth-century appeals to alumni sought personal stories of the 'kind of material not contained in official records', and provided a list of prompts or questions for correspondents to answer.[43] Published memoirs, too, are valuable, though scholars need to be aware of the conventions of this genre of life writing and the rhetorical devices authors may employ. Carol Dyhouse's examination of the biographies and autobiographies of women medical students argues, for instance, that they often share the features of a literary genre – the 'quest' – in which pioneering women triumph over adversity.[44] The published memoirs of international students coming to the UK also cross genres, blending memoir with travelogue and often devoting much space to the author's first impressions of the UK.[45]

Like oral history, memoir is challenging historical source subject to problems of 'myth-making and memory loss'.[46] Alumni writing about their own university or college rarely claim objectivity, with memoir titles such as 'The happiest year of my life' not uncommon.[47] The tendency to 'obscure, forget, or mythologise' involvement in social and political action is strong, as can be the desire to downplay engagement in activities or

[40]Huxford and Wallace, "Voices of the University," 98.
[41]Thomas, *British Student Movement*; and Hughes, *Young Lives on the Left*.
[42]Young "Whose Story Counts?"
[43]Coldstream in *The Times*, 5 April 1958 cited in Brewis and Blaxland, *Student London*.
[44]Dyhouse, "Driving Ambitions."
[45]For just some of many examples see: Haldar, *English Diary; Tyau, Chinese Eyes*, Xianyi, *White Tiger*; Tyau, *London through Chinese eyes*; Atiyah, *An Arab Tells His Story*; and Chagla, *Roses in December*.
[46]Brewis, *Student Volunteering*, 9.
[47]Brewis and Blaxland, *Student London*.

campaigns later readers might see as unacceptable.[48] However, memoir is helpful for adding to our knowledge of day-to-day lives as well as for insights into difficult subjects such as sex and relationships or student interactions with domestic staff such as cleaners and porters who can be invisible in official records.[49]

Student media: The press, radio, film, television, photography and social media

Student media was the focus of the second of our seminars and highlighted both areas of considerable scholarly activity and areas of virtual absence from the archival record. The first of the full-length articles in this special issue – 'The European Student Press, 1800–1940: A Difficult Historical Source' by Antonin Dubois – argues that while the student press has been well-used by historians of nineteenth and twentieth century student movements, it has been little studied in its own right. The paper aims to situate the student press within both the broader history of students and universities and histories of the press, to give historians perspectives on how to (better) use it. Here, we will concentrate on the issues related to student media in the period after the Second World War. Of all student sources, the student press has, perhaps, received the most attention from historians and been used most widely.[50] In fact, one would be hard pressed to find any examination of student life that does *not* use the student press. There are obvious methodological reasons for this – historians are used to using the press in their work and student newspapers are quite prolific and have benefitted the most from microfilming and digitisation efforts, making them much more widely available than other types of student produced materials. However, just as scholars have noted particular methodological issues with the use of mainstream digitised newspapers,[51] student newspapers are also fraught with complexity that needs to be carefully considered if they are to be used ethically and transparently. As Dubois notes in his article, student newspapers have very different histories throughout Europe. This is not just a European story, however. A number of scholars have written about the role of student newspapers in campus activism around the world.[52] Student newspapers have been used to fill in the blanks where official minutes of conferences and meetings have been lost or seized, as happened in South Africa.[53] Scholars in Australia have also highlighted the role of the student press as a 'radical' political voice.[54] The digitisation of the student press, particularly in the British case, poses some distinct methodological challenges for scholars.

One of the first challenges that scholars encounter in relation to the student press is that publications are not easily located. Unlike in Australia, there is no central repository of student newspapers or magazines in the UK. Instead, researchers need to know they exist and know where to find them, which is not always easy. This often means relying on

[48]Brewis, *Student Volunteering*, 9.
[49]Brewis and Blaxland, *Student London*.
[50]See for example, Smith, *No Platform*; and Harrington, "A World Apart."
[51]Bingham, "Digitization of Newspaper Archives"; and Nicholson, "The Digital Turn."
[52]Salazar, "Movimiento Voices on Campus"; Omanga and Buigutt, "Marx on Campus"; Barrenberg and Salmi-Niklander, "Finnish and Norwegian Student Societies."
[53]Badat, *Black Student Politics*, 13.
[54]Lymn and Jones, "Radical Holdings?"; and Wood, *Dissent*.

lists of student newspapers or journals compiled on Wikipedia rather than in established archival databases. If newspapers have been collected and preserved, which it is not always possible to determine, there is often a great deal of work required to identify where these might be.[55] Most often, for example at the Universities of Warwick, UK, the University of Manitoba, Canada and Te Herenga Waka – Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, the university's special collections have preserved and scanned print student newspapers.[56] In some cases, for example at Newcastle University, a digitised version of the *Newcastle Courier* is available on a standalone website although it is based on material held in the University's special collections.[57] In the case of *Trinity News*, the student newspaper of Trinity College Dublin, the archive is held on a bespoke website with funding provided by the institution, carried out by a private company, and the project overseen by an alumni.[58] Thus, each student newspaper has been preserved and made accessible in a different way. There are no shortcuts for researchers to be able to easily identify them. At the time of writing, less than 10 per cent of UK universities, just over 20 per cent of Australian universities, and approximately seven per cent of Canadian universities, to name a few, have made digitised versions of their student newspapers freely available online. However, it is possible that these figures are higher due to the problems of identification and the lack of central repositories, except in the case of Australia. While the funding patterns of these digitisation projects are each different, and often obscure, the vast majority of digitised student papers, including all of those in the UK, were created by students at relatively wealthy, 'elite' institutions. If researchers rely solely on digitised student newspapers or magazines we may end up with skewed ideas that do not account for the full range of student experiences. In addition, each of the publications that have been digitised have used different methods and only some of them are searchable by keyword which limits their usability. For those that are text-searchable there are sometimes issues with the OCR (Optical Character Recognition) results which also limits the extent to which digital history tools can be effectively used to help analyse the millions of words contained within student newspapers.[59] Even when it is possible to access material using keyword searches, this tends to treat student newspapers as strictly textual material which they are not. As will be discussed further below, the images contained within student newspapers, including photographs, cartoons, and advertisements, could all form the basis of their own research projects and deserve additional consideration.

Student newspapers have been created and preserved in ways that make them patchy records of the student experience at best. The production of student publications was largely dependent on the enthusiasm and hard work of a small number of students each year and they often struggled to recruit enough staff and secure adequate funding for regular production. The quick turnover of staff often meant that key information was

[55]Burkett has compiled a website listing digitised English language student newspapers: https://sites.google.com/port.ac.uk/historicstudentnewspapers/home.
[56]University of Warwick digitised student newspaper collection: https://cdm21047.contentdm.oclc.org/digital/collection/boar/search/.. University of Manitoba digitised collection of *The Manitoban*: https://digitalcollections.lib.umanitoba.ca/islandora/object/uofm:1419425. Victoria University of Wellington digitised collection of *Salient*: https://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-corpus-salient.html.
[57]The *Newcastle Courier* archive: https://courierarchive.ncl.ac.uk/home.
[58]The digital archive of *Trinity News* can be found here: http://www.trinitynewsarchive.ie/.
[59]Burkett and Deschamps, "British Student Newspapers."

not passed from one editorial team to another resulting in a range of problems including irregular production, incorrect numbering of issues, and changes of name, purpose, political position and relationship to the students' union and the institution's governors. Most of these changes were not discussed overtly, but need to be ascertained through close reading. It is rare indeed to find a student newspaper in which the author of individual articles is named. There is usually an indication of who constituted the editorial team, although where this information is located is not uniform even within the same publication. Most often, the editor and a few other key positions are identified with individual names, but the majority of the contributors to a publication are simply provided as a list with no indication of who contributed what. Also, even when a name is provided, it is not always clear if this is a real name, pseudonym or, even, an inside joke. Often, therefore, it is best to treat these as anonymous. The temptation, then, becomes to attribute the ideas contained within these publications to 'students' as a collective which is clearly not the case and can hide the complexity of different views held among students both broadly and within the same institution or group.

Student newspapers and magazines also need to be understood and examined within their many phases of production, not just as a finished text but as a physical and ideological object.[60] As Beins has shown in her work on feminist periodicals, the creation of material including the procurement of content, its translation into published material, the process of circulation, and usage of the material all inform the ways in which historians can, and should, analyse the material.[61] There are some similarities between feminist periodicals and student newspapers, but there are also key differences between the two, particularly in the relationship of the student press to students' unions which significantly affect the procurement, circulation, and usage aspects of Beins' proposed model. There are also some overlaps between the student press and zines that were produced by youth subcultures. Matthew Worley's work on punk fanzines has shown how important these publications were to the creation of a punk identity and provides a blueprint of how to recover political content from a milieu that is not explicitly political, while scholars such as Hroch, have highlighted the importance of the 'materiality' of zines.[62] In the UK context, there have been various national student publications such as the Communist-affiliated *Student Vanguard* (1934–6), which later transformed into the more broad-based *Student Front* (1936–1939) and *Student News* (from 1939). Its evident left-wing leanings and claim to make 'no pretence at impartiality' makes it in some ways a more straightforward source than publications linked to a particular college, university or students' union where editorial independence is less clear.[63]

The student press is also replete with visual information which also needs to be assessed. As well as the photography illustrating stories, student newspapers were often a place for students to disseminate their artistic productions, particularly cartoons and comics, useful for their insights into changing student 'attitudes and preoccupations'.[64] A number of student publications also include photographs of topless female students, particularly during the 1970s, which deserve analysis in relation to changing ideas and

[60]Darnton, "What is the History of Books."
[61]Beins, "Publishing Assemblage."
[62]Worley, "Punk, Politics and British (Fan)zines"; and Hroch, "Not Out of Date."
[63]Brewis, *Social History*, 10.
[64]Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 14.

norms around gender, sexuality, and women's bodies. Student publications also contain advertisements which can be very revealing about the ways in which students are perceived by the local community and businesses, as well as classified ads, poetry and prose fiction, letters to the editor and a range of other types of non-news content. All of this material on the 'margins' of the print are deserving of discussion and analysis as Harry G. Cocks and Matthew Rubery have shown.[65]

While print newspapers and magazines have increasingly featured in the work of historians in the past few years, other forms of student media are notable by their absence. As we discovered when organising the series of workshops upon which this collection is based, there is no real historical or scholarly engagement with other forms of student media including radio, film, photography or social media. In the case of broadcast radio this is at least partially the result of gaps within the archival record. To date, we are unaware of any archived student radio productions and have only come across the notes of some individual student radio DJs by accident within individual institutional special collections. Such notes are usually drafts of intended content, rather than a record of what was actually broadcast. We know that some leading British radio and broadcast journalists 'cut their teeth' via student media, and that student radio and television have played important roles in creating student cultures and breaking news stories. They also have impressive histories: the student radio station at the University of York – which started in 1967 - was the first non-BBC radio service to legally broadcast in the UK.[66] UCL's pioneering Film & TV Society, founded in 1948, has an extensive film archive that includes an annual 'newsreel' that captured the key moments in student life each year from the 1950s to the 1980s, which it describes as the most 'comprehensive record on film of any British university'.[67] Other scholars have identified students in other local and national film archives, such as Pathé newsreels of student rag, which 'offer insights beyond the media artefacts themselves: in this case, about the culture of interwar higher education and how it featured in a wider popular imagination'.[68] Where possible, retrieving and making use of these materials, then, might offer new opportunities to understand student life and broader social and cultural trends.

Material culture

As in other areas of historical scholarship, there has been a material turn in recent research on student lives, but there remains limited academic discussion on this topic.[69] Jane Hamlett has examined the material and visual culture of everyday life at Royal Holloway, University of London and the Oxford and Cambridge colleges, comparing the decorative and design choices made by male and female students to offer insights into gendered nature of late nineteenth century student culture.[70] In his study of masculinity among Oxford and Cambridge students, Paul Deslandes similarly explored the pleasure taken by students in their 'things' - the furniture, artwork, books, sporting equipment and

[65]Cocks and Rubery, "Introduction: Margins of Print," 15.
[66]https://www.york.ac.uk/50/history/timeline/.
[67]UCL Film & TV Society, https://uclfilm.com.
[68]Dyhouse, *Students;* Rutherford, "Researching and Teaching with British Newsreels," 458.
[69]Dussel, "Visuality, Materiality, and History."; and Hotelano et al. *They Live.*
[70]Hamlett, "Nicely Feminine, Yet Learned."

china they used to furnish their Oxbridge rooms, the food they consumed in these rooms, and the clothing that they chose to project their college identity.[71] While Deslandes notes that 'the words of students', mostly from the student press – along with other documents such as letters, diaries, disciplinary records and advertisements – form the main source base for his research, his study also draws on the visual evidence contained in cartoons and photographs.[72] Similarly Hamlett's research mostly examines photographs of student rooms and student things, not the material objects themselves. Both Deslandes' and Hamlett's work focused on the significance of space and place in shaping student experiences, and this has been taken further by historians such as William Whyte in *Redbrick*. A new study by Georgia Oman explores the gendering of spaces on co-educational campuses in late nineteenth century England.[73]

Our final workshop held in September 2022 examined the material culture of student life. We showcased the large collection of ephemera from the National Union of Students that we are pleased to note will now mostly be preserved alongside other NUS archive materials (see Emily Sharp's contribution to this special issue). Educational consultant Hugh Jones displayed his higher education postcard collection, examples of which have formed a weekly feature article on the WonkHE website since 2021.[74] Neatly arranged in alphabetical folders, this is a privately-assembled collection of historic postcards dating back to the early twentieth century and feature images of university and college buildings, photographs of campuses and, more rarely, people.

The fact that research on students rarely engages directly with the objects themselves perhaps reflects the fact that it is not until relatively recently that university archives services have begun to systematically collect objects.[75] Universities and colleges often keep historic and ceremonial objects on display, while some institutions have museum spaces dedicated to the history of the university. Smaller items like pin badges, academic medals, mascots, sporting memorabilia or items of clothing may have been preserved by students' unions or donated by alumni and made their way into university archives, often more through serendipity than collecting priorities. At University College London for example, a striped purple blazer from the 1940s belonging to alumna Enid Sampson took pride of place in a 2023 exhibition exploring 200 years of student life in London, but this was only donated to UCL Special Collections in 2019 by Enid's daughter. Other items of clothing chosen to display – including a 1960s scarf, a 1980s tie, a 1990s t-shirt and a 2020s hoodie – all had to be borrowed from alumni or purchased, forming an important source base for a book examining *Student London*.[76] Similarly, moves to acquire objects and student reminiscences may be driven more by university marketing and development priorities than research agendas – as in the example of an alumni event at the University of Portsmouth to mark 30 years of university status which resulted in the acquisition of a range of badges, posters, and other items.

The 'History of the World in 100 objects' project led by the British Museum and the BBC, first broadcast in 2010, sparked a rash of similar initiatives worldwide. In particular,

[71]Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 71.
[72]Deslandes, *Oxbridge Men*, 14.
[73]Oman, *Gendering of Space*.
[74]See https://wonkhe.com/tag/postcards/.
[75]Beard and Brewis, "Different Traditions."
[76]Johnston, "There is no University Without its Students."; and Brewis and Blaxland, *Student London*.

universities and colleges have turned to objects to mark particular anniversaries through object-led exhibitions, blog series and illustrated volumes.[77] Such celebratory, 'listicle' books have been criticised for offering a 'reductive' vision of what it means to look at an object, and in many cases tend to use objects merely as an illustration of a concept or story, with objects sometimes seen as a 'vessel for already developed ideas'.[78] A volume on Aberystwyth University, for example, features an eclectic mix of objects including blazers, props designed for rag floats, carved spoons, paintings, student magazines and ceramics, with some interesting discussion on how these objects can illuminate less well-known aspects of its history. At the University of Stirling, the list contains relatively few actual artefacts, such as the Chancellor's robes, a graduation cap and an Athena Swan trophy, as the volume also chooses to highlight spaces and places on campus including student accommodation, the university supermarket, gardens and buildings.

The potential research uses for material objects that tell the history of student life are compelling. As Ulrich et al suggest in their 2015 book about Harvard University's collections, 'just about any tangible thing can be pressed into service as primary historical evidence', suggesting that knowledge of the past is too often 'constrained by reliance on written materials alone'.[79] Examining branded student clothing such as badges, scarves and blazers can give insights into shifting gender relations on campus, for instance, exploring the distinct identities that separate men's and women's students' unions carved out within co-educational institutions. The Harvard collections contain a 1925 crimson field hockey dress that illustrates 'the progressive development of a vibrant collegiate culture at Radcliffe separate from male-dominated Harvard' as well as charting new freedoms for women in sport as they jettisoned heavy wool 'bloomers' worn by previous generations. The dress was donated by alumna Elizabeth Wright Plimpton in 1987 along with some scrapbooks, but the garment itself has been described as 'a more powerful record of her undergraduate days than the scrapbooks' which contained little that was personal. Elizabeth also donated her own mother's heavy wool gymnasium suit, with its tight cuffs and bloomers designed to hide the contours of a woman's body, adding 'another layer to the history of Radcliffe and the history of women's sports in general'.[80] Rowing blazers around the world are the subject of an entire highly illustrated coffee-table book by Carlon. It pinpoints the origins of what became an iconic item of student clothing in the colourful jackets worn by Oxford and Cambridge rowers in the early nineteenth century, with the 'blazing red' of one boat club giving a new name to the garment that became widespread in the 1870s and 1880s.[81]

Seemingly mundane items such as cutlery or crockery from a student refectory can illuminate the value of communal dining and collective living to past generations of students. Albums of printed documents or photographs selected and curated by students or student organisations become more than the sum of their parts, giving insights into student priorities. Changes in pedagogy and the technology used by students in their academic studies can be illustrated by the study of scientific instruments, microscopes,

[77]See for example Wolfe, *Mr Jefferson's Telescope*; *Fifty: University of Stirling in 50 Objects*; *Aberystwyth University in 150 Objects*.
[78]Carter cited in Onion, "Object Lessons."
[79]Ulrich et al, *Tangible Things*, 2–3.
[80]Ulrich et al, *Tangible Things*, 35, 64, 65.
[81]Carlon, *Rowing Blazers*.

calculators, record players, tape decks, computers, laptops and mobile phones. Items such as head spanners, craniometers, eye colour samples and hair texture charts used for taking anthropometric measurements cast light on some of the darker eugenic legacies of higher education institutions, and raise ethical questions about the retention and use of such collections for teaching or research.[82] Objects may not even be formerly accessioned to be useful in research, for example old sporting equipment or props from student plays can lie unnoticed as decorations in student bars and social spaces.[83] Indeed a request for objects needed in the curation of an exhibition or for use in teaching can alter the collecting priorities of a university archives service. Documentary sources such as printed tickets to student 'hops' or discos, performances and concerts can take on new meanings as important memory documents when they are considered as material objects that students saved to commemorate a special night out. While there is limited academic analysis of the material culture of student life, objects and university collections are increasingly used in higher education teaching, including in courses exploring institutional history, campus culture and student life.[84]

Conclusion

To produce satisfactory histories of higher education, scholarship needs to foreground histories of students and graduates. As the afterword to the special issue by Josh Patel reflects, a deeper understanding and knowledge of higher education history can support more informed policy decisions and help shape public discourse in the context of ongoing limited resources and lack of political will. Patel's article reflects on the state of the field of higher education histories, focusing on post-war England, suggesting we must move beyond a narrow focus on universities to produce 'histories of tertiary education'. Taking this more expansive approach, but still foregrounding student voices, allows us to tell the histories of institutional and education-policy change from students' perspectives. A range of disciplines have investigated the transformative implications of education for social mobility, and this article shows that the use of student-produced material can help to nuance, deepen, and humanise some of the more sweeping narratives about the drivers of social change. It reminds us that people – with all their creativity, complexity, and multiplicities – have been at the heart of institutions and processes. There are clear historiographical stakes to this work. But the stakes are greater than that: for historians with teaching responsibilities within higher education, this work is also a reminder that our students are historical agents, who may yet well be future objects of study, as well as being nascent investigators of the past.

One of the aims of this introduction has been to highlight areas around which historiographical interest has coalesced, and areas that are potentially fruitful for further study. It has emphasised that there is room for much greater engagement between scholars of material culture and historians of higher education on the value of student-related objects for research and teaching, for example. This is underlined by recent pilot work that has shown that contemporary students can benefit from engaging with

[82]McEnroe, "Unfit for Society?"
[83]Curating student life – planning our Octagon exhibition | Students Union UCL.
[84]Brewis and Hannan, "Worlds of UCL"; and Behr and Nevin, "Roehampton Campus Project."

historical student-produced material, demonstrating that in this area the boundaries between research and teaching can be productively blurred.[85] There is important work to be done on the experiences of particular groups of students across time, location, and institution type – not least those from minoritised communities. The editorial collective of this special edition argue, ultimately, that the methodological challenges posed by the use of student-produced material should not be tackled exclusively by historians of higher education, because this material does not exclusively pertain to these histories. Instead, and as the articles within this edition show, student sources can augment our understanding of a rich multitude of historical fields and paying greater attention to these sources and histories can enrich our understandings of the past in myriad ways.

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Notes on contributors

Georgina Brewis is Professor of Social History in the Department of Education, Practice and Society at UCL Institute of Education. She is a historian of higher education, voluntary action and humanitarianism in Britain and the wider world.

Jodi Burkett is Senior Lecturer in History at the University of Portsmouth. Her research explores the legacies of empire in Britain, particularly related to students' anti-racist activism. She is currently writing a history of international students in the UK.

Sarah Crook is Senior Lecturer in History at Swansea University. Her work focuses on histories of activism, experience, and health in postwar Britain. She is currently working on the history of student mental heath.

ORCID

Georgina Brewis http://orcid.org/0000-0003-4273-7724
Jodi Burkett http://orcid.org/0000-0002-8160-912X
Sarah Crook http://orcid.org/0000-0002-1288-1488

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