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Document Version

Submitted manuscript

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Citation for published version (APA):

Newby, A. (2016, Mar 4). Contextualising the 'D.P. Controversy': UK student responses to European migration after WWII. <http://universityhistories.com/2016/03/04/contextualising-the-d-p-controversy-uk-student-responses-to-european-migration-after-wwii/>

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University Histories Blog Post

Contextualising the 'D. P. Controversy': UK student responses to European migration after WWII

Dr Alison Newby (22/02/16)

Migrants are in the news. Wave upon wave of refugees from all over the world, risking life and limb to reach the shores of Europe. Set to be one of the most intractable issues of the century, the scale of this crisis can easily seem unprecedented. But is it?

Europe has experienced refugee crises before. The level of internal displacement after World War II was even greater and the challenges possibly even grimmer than those we face now. At least today's refugees are clambering precariously into comparatively rich industrialised economies in peacetime. The flotsam and jetsam of the 1940s cataclysm were mired in the wreckage of those same economies, mangled as they were by devastation and destruction. Millions of people had been displaced with little hope for the future amid insurmountable difficulties in the present.

Amongst those displaced masses was a generation of university students. How did students in the UK respond to migration and the complex issues surrounding the task of 'reconstructing university life' in Europe after the war? This blog post will touch on the reaction nationally on campuses during the 1940s, before presenting how those issues played out specifically in the 'D.P. Student Controversy' in the University of Manchester Student Unions from 1949 to 1950.

By the 1940s a particular sense of student identity had emerged which ensured that the plight of displaced students across Europe did not go unnoticed among their peers in the UK. Georgina Brewis's work on student volunteering¹ charts the decades of voluntary action and coordination of national and international student associations in universities which had strengthened that sense of student identity, as well as the drive among students nationally to undertake campaigns and social service as students for students.

Significant national and international student organisations were active on UK campuses. By the war's end, British students were already supporting an extensive relief programme for student victims. Universities in occupied territories had been viewed by the Nazis as breeding grounds for opposition to their regime, with the consequence that students were an actively persecuted population. What became known as World Student Relief (WSR) was set up by International Student Service (ISS), the World Student Christian Federation (WSCF), and the Catholic group Pax Romana to focus on the needs of student refugees in particular.

UK students participated in helping WSR provide study material to both Allied and Axis student prisoners of war, send food supplies to students in occupied countries, and set up rest centres for students in liberated areas. After the war WSR was recognised by the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration (UNRRA) as a relief agency specialising in the reconstruction of university life.

The National Union of Students (NUS) was also active on campuses, cooperating with the likes of ISS internationally to increase awareness of the scale of the task. In 1946, the NUS helped establish the International Union of Students (IUS). This new body lacked the specifically religious impetus that had historically driven the organisations noted above. Soon divided into opposing camps reflecting the growing chasm between east and west reflected in the emerging Cold War, IUS came to be increasingly viewed with suspicion by many as being overly influenced by Communists.

The rehabilitation of Germany as well as contacts with local and displaced students there were much-debated subjects. British student delegations to Germany contributed reports to their institutional magazines and newspapers revealing the extent of deprivation amongst students, emphasising the need for essential intellectual

contacts to reduce Germany's isolation. These reports educated the wider student body. It was in this broader context that a scheme encouraged by the UN International Relief Organisation (IRO) and organised by ISS arose to resettle selected displaced students from Germany and Austria within universities in countries such as the UK, the US and Canada.

By March 1949, the US was absorbing 1,500 such students, Canada 50 and the UK 35. IRO had set rigid standards for who would be considered a 'D.P. Student' in order to eliminate Quislings. Applicants needed to have gained their Matura qualification, and to have previously attended university - in the country they had been forced to leave, a German university, or the Baltic University, Pinneberg (a temporary institution in Displaced Persons camps in Germany, opened in 1946 to educate refugees from the Baltic States). In the UK, assurances were given by certain universities that they would accept specific numbers of such students. Oxford undertook to accept 3, Birmingham decided on 1 or 2, whilst Exeter, Cardiff, Liverpool and Manchester each opened their doors to 1.

So much for the bigger picture. How did this play out locally amongst students in individual UK universities? Unfortunately, actual contemporary student views and activities are difficult to uncover. University archives have tended to see student union records in particular as 'dispensable ephemera'. With a few honourable exceptions, institutions have made no effort to preserve them. Thus it is necessary to extrapolate from what little remains to get a feel for events and attitudes at a grassroots student level. To flesh out the story of how UK students responded to the migration of their peers from Europe, this study utilises resources held in the archives of the University of Manchester, reconstructing the so-called 'D. P. Student Controversy' in the University's three Student Unions during 1949 to 1950.²

The question of 'D.P. Students from Germany' seems first to have arisen in March 1949. The Women's Union (WU) sub-committee noted that acceptance of such students in universities across the UK could create considerable antagonism because university entrance was already so difficult for UK nationals. Nevertheless, sub-committee members wanted to support the presence of a D.P. Student. To avoid problems in the wider student body, they suggested seeking the University's consent, having the NUS control the financial aid, and raising money to support the student through voluntary contribution from other students.

Subsequently, the General Committee of the Men's Union (MU) discussed in detail raising funds to cover the expenses of the D.P. Student. However, members faced an uphill struggle when an opposing faction decried the very idea of adopting such a student in the first place. Clearly, D.P. Students in Europe constituted a divisive issue on campus. Some in the student body were incensed that sacrosanct principles of democracy and freedom of speech were being threatened in this case by attempts among the factions to manipulate Student Union procedures to promote their own agendas. Eventually a motion at an Extraordinary General Meeting of MU was roundly defeated following a discussion in which ideological and political objections to displaced persons en masse were unsuccessfully pitted against a humanitarian plea for individual action.

The matter of the D.P. Student had tapped a rich vein of disagreement which continued to divide student opinion. Proceedings during a later WU General Meeting laid the precise bones of contention bare. The President supported an IUS missive outlining the trials and tribulations of D.P. Students, stating that the Committee recommended the WU join with the other two Unions to support the D.P. Student Scheme. However, wider ideological divisions concerning fears that the IUS was too close to Communists were filtering down into the student body itself, and this was reflected in the ensuing WU debate.

Sensitive to this, the NUS representative distanced herself from the IUS position, doubting that the D.P. Student Scheme was really necessary. The ISS representative advocated a broader view, saying that a D.P. Student should be allowed to benefit from experience of the British way of life to take back a conception of British democracy to less fortunate people at home. Another participant thought "colonials" should be invited rather than suspected "Fascist" undesirables. And yet another advocated strongly that Manchester should live up to its increasing reputation by setting an example for the furtherance of international understanding.

Student opinion in Manchester was clearly divided on the same lines reflected in the national debates described above.

Clarifications appeared in the University's student press giving assurances that international bodies would ensure the exclusion of Quislings from the Scheme. British University lecturers working in Germany would serve on selection committees, and rigid IRO standards would be imposed on decisions about potential candidates. A shortlist would be sent to UK university departments able to accept a student. By October 1949, the three Student Unions had agreed the principle of maintaining a D.P. Student in Manchester for three years. The names and dossiers of candidates were examined by the Student Union Presidents in conjunction with the University authorities.

Thus it was that students participated in deciding which D.P. Student would benefit from attending the University under the Scheme, and student activities raised the funds to pay for his stay. The chosen student finally arrived in October 1950.

The above illustrates that, even at a local level, divisions existed in the UK student body surrounding the issue of the migration to Britain of D.P. Students. These divisions reflected wider ideological disagreements which in part stemmed from the emergence of the Cold War that would separate east and west in Europe for decades to come. Nevertheless, traditions of student voluntarism, activism and social service as students for students continued to be influential. The sense of a unique student identity that transcended borders won out in the skirmishes surrounding the controversial policy of accepting within the university displaced people from a region of Europe ravaged, not only by the effects of war, but also by the social collapse which flowed from the destruction of the Fascist regime that had caused so much harm.

Notes

1. See Georgina Brewis's superb study: *A Social History of Student Volunteering. Britain and Beyond, 1880-1980* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan 2014).
2. According to Brewis, the Universities of Cambridge and Liverpool have excellent records, as have several women's colleges. This study pieces together the D.P. Student Controversy from editions of the University of Manchester's *News Bulletin* of 1949 to 1950. The *News Bulletin* was the official newspaper of the three Student Unions of the University of Manchester. The three Unions were the Women's Union, Men's Union and Tech Union (representing UMIST students), and they coordinated operations during the period. Student-originated material such as the *Bulletins* has rarely been preserved, so the availability of this University of Manchester publication (running from 21 November 1932 to 10 November 1960) offers a significant window into the world of students at the time. It can be consulted in the University of Manchester Archive, and was brought to my attention by Dr Sarah Webster, who has also written for this blog. Information concerning international student numbers generally over time at the University of Manchester and its antecedents has not been collated, but can be gleaned from the volumes of *Reports of Council to the Court of Governors* which run from 1871 to 1996. The category 'Stateless' is mentioned in three of these: 1951 (1 student); 1952 (2 students); 1954 (1 student). 'Stateless' appears to refer to the displaced student who benefited from the D.P. Student Scheme, though it is not clear why there are two in 1952 and none in 1953.