



## Facilitating the 'Silk Road of Knowledge'

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### Citation for published version (APA):

Newby, A. (2016). Facilitating the 'Silk Road of Knowledge': Southern Voices and the Manchester Universities Experience. In *Facilitating the 'Silk Road of Knowledge': Southern Voices and the Manchester Universities Experience*

### Published in:

Facilitating the 'Silk Road of Knowledge'

### Citing this paper

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**FACILITATING THE 'SILK ROAD OF KNOWLEDGE':**  
**SOUTHERN VOICES AND**  
**THE MANCHESTER UNIVERSITIES EXPERIENCE**

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Paper given at:

Mapping the Historical Geographies of Higher Education in Greater Manchester Symposium  
University of Manchester  
9 November 2016

Session "Student Experience"



## **ABSTRACT**

The ancient 'Silk Road' was a complex network facilitating the transfer of people, goods and ideas over vast distances, ultimately influencing and linking vastly differing cultures and societies the length and breadth of the known world. For the last century or so, universities and institutions of learning in the West have been the physical destinations and 'stopping-off points' for thousands of travellers on a 'Silk Road of Knowledge', situated at the crossroads of highways bearing information flowing from the local to the global and global to local - information that has played its part in transforming the societies of the world. The ancient 'Silk Road' encompassed the infrastructure which facilitated the mutual exchange of precious goods and commodities between East and West. Has a similarly mutual exchange of knowledge been facilitated by the institutions care taking the infrastructure of our 'Silk Road of Knowledge'?

As part of ongoing research on the international student experience in the UK past and present, I am currently studying the archive of a voluntary organisation based in Manchester called *Southern Voices* (concentrating on the period from its foundation in 1990 to 2005).<sup>1</sup> Its stated aim has been to allow voices from the 'Global South' to be heard on their own terms in the 'Global North'. Groups as well as individuals from the Global North have traditionally taken it upon themselves to speak on behalf of the Global South, in general ignoring the actual history and contribution of the Global South in presentations of views of the past which prioritise the interests and perspectives of the Global North.

*Southern Voices* emerged as an independent entity from an initiative originated in the Development Education Project based on the Didsbury campus of Manchester Polytechnic (soon to become Manchester Metropolitan University/MMU). University-based resources have been significant in its development. These resources include office spaces on University of Manchester and MMU campuses; venues off campus amongst university buildings used for holding meetings and other functions; collaboration and liaison with course leaders and Student Union representatives at the universities; a pool of international students from the Global South from which to recruit volunteers to help design and deliver educational and cultural projects to inform immigrant and other communities in Greater Manchester of Global South perspectives, contexts and issues. These international students, coordinated by *Southern Voices*, worked at different times with schools, the Manchester Museum, The Hat Museum in Stockport, the Museum of Science and Industry, and the Tate Museum, Liverpool.

Here was an intriguing confluence bringing together the public, academia and Global South citizens in circumstances conducive to an exchange of information that could transform their lives. But how easy was the relationship between the small group of volunteers and the bureaucratic hierarchy represented by the universities? Was this ultimately a mutual exchange? Were the universities of the Manchester region facilitators or ultimately hindrances in this innovative attempt to nurture a Manchester contribution to the 'Silk Road of Knowledge'?

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Alison Newby is currently Honorary Research Associate at the Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre, University of Manchester.

## **PAPER**

As part of ongoing research on the international student experience in the UK, past and present, I have been working on the records of a small Manchester-based voluntary organisation called *Southern Voices*. Preservation of such records is rare, and the archive is held in The University of Manchester's *Ahmed Iqbal Ullah Race Relations Resource Centre*, which specialises in the history of race relations in the UK and further afield.<sup>2</sup>

The international student experience at its best is part of a global exchange of ideas and worldviews. I have conceptualised the infrastructure facilitating this exchange as comprising a 'Silk Road of Knowledge' - akin to the Silk Road of old along which people, goods and ideas travelled vast distances, influencing and linking vastly differing cultures and societies the length and breadth of the known world.

This paper consists of the following four sections:

1. ***Introduction to Southern Voices***, indicating its origins, purpose and context within the universities of the Manchester region.
2. ***Brief explanation of what I mean by the 'Silk Road of Knowledge'***, showing how the *Southern Voices* organisation and the universities in the Manchester region feature in this scenario, raising questions concerning whether an exchange of knowledge was facilitated or hindered.
3. ***Examination of two specific periods in the history of Southern Voices*** to shed light on the nature of interactions between the University of Manchester and *Southern Voices*, focusing on 1990 to 1993 (the period of the group's establishment) and 2002 to 2005 (particularly the beginnings of its cooperation with The Manchester Museum, one of the cultural institutions which is part of the University of Manchester).
4. ***Consideration of the questions raised in 2 above and Conclusion*** about to what extent a 'Silk Road of Knowledge' was facilitated or hindered in Manchester during the period covered.

### **1. Introducing *Southern Voices***

*Southern Voices* was founded in 1990 by a handful of postgraduate international students as the *Southern Voices Project*, within the Development Education Project on the Didsbury Campus of what was then Manchester Polytechnic (soon to become Manchester Metropolitan University). The name was chosen deliberately, for the voices of people from the 'Global South' were rarely if ever

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<sup>2</sup> The Southern Voices Archive Collection contains materials relating to the years 1990 (the year of the organisation's foundation) to 2005. It includes documentation covering: decisions about the legal framework of *Southern Voices*; various projects and collaborations; day-to-day administrative papers (meeting agendas and minutes, workshop plans and evaluation sheets, correspondence, publications, applications for funding). For more information, see the introductory blog posts by MANBY, Jo, "Southern Voices Project Archive Collection" Part 1 and Part 2:

<https://aiucentre.wordpress.com/2016/05/05/southern-voices-project-archive-collection-part-1/>  
<https://aiucentre.wordpress.com/2016/05/19/southern-voices-project-archive-collection-part-2/>.

heard in the 'Global North' on their own terms. Indeed, individuals and groups from the Global North have traditionally taken it upon themselves to speak on behalf of the Global South, generally ignoring its actual history and contribution, and presenting views of the past and present which prioritise the interests and perspectives of the Global North. The originators of the *Southern Voices Project* thought it would be "a good idea" to try to remedy this situation.<sup>3</sup>

The *Southern Voices Project* soon became an independent entity known as *Southern Voices*, raising funds over the years to support its projects from sources such as the European Union, Christian Aid, the Department for International Development, and the Methodist Relief & Development Fund.<sup>4</sup> University-based resources remained significant to the group's development. International students from the Global South worked on and delivered the projects, liaison with course leaders and Student Union representatives formed a significant part of networking, and having offices located on the campus of the University of Manchester was an important priority, enhancing the organisation's ability to meet with and attract international students from all the universities in the Manchester region.

These student volunteers helped design and deliver educational and cultural projects to inform immigrant and other communities in Greater Manchester of Global South perspectives, contexts and issues. Over time, *Southern Voices* coordinated projects with schools, The Manchester Museum, The Hat Museum in Stockport, The Museum of Science & Industry, and The Tate, Liverpool.<sup>5</sup>

A tiny nucleus of committed individuals fed, coordinated and linked together a complex network which aimed to bring the voices of Southern people to the table - in academia, in the diverse communities in Greater Manchester, and (once the international students had returned home) far beyond.

## **2. The 'Silk Road of Knowledge'**

As noted above, the international student experience at its best is part of a global exchange of ideas and worldviews. I have conceptualised the infrastructure facilitating this exchange as comprising a 'Silk Road of Knowledge' - akin to the Silk Road of old, which followed routes between what we now call the Far East and Europe, crossing Central Asia and the Middle East. People, goods, ideas - wealth as well as what could only have been viewed as strange and wonderful cultural insights flowed back and forth along these routes.

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<sup>3</sup> *Southern Voices'* first employee (co-ordinator Jaya Graves) described it this way in a document she prepared around 2002 to celebrate the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the organisation. See "Introduction" (Southern Voices Archive Collection, Box 2, Doc 3228.11/9/29/1). Graves had trained as a Rudolph Steiner teacher and worked extensively with the peace movement through the 1970s and 1980s. As co-ordinator of *Southern Voices*, she was as committed as the founders to presenting views, perspectives and voices of people from Southern (or 'developing') countries in different contexts where development education was practised and 'developing' issues were discussed.

<sup>4</sup> Information concerning funding bodies and work undertaken using the grants received can be found in the various reports and accounts preserved in the Southern Voices Archive Collection. *Southern Voices* was supported for twelve years (until 2003-4) by European Union grants that required 50% matched funding. Bodies such as Christian Aid, Department for International Development, and Methodist Relief & Development Fund at various times supplied that matched funding, which covered the costs of various projects as well as core costs which enabled *Southern Voices* to function. Local funding from the Manchester Neighbourhood Renewal Community Chest was also received.

<sup>5</sup> Some of these are mentioned in "Annual Report from Southern Voices to Methodist Relief and Development Fund June 2000 – May/June 2001" (Southern Voices Archive Collection, Box 1, Doc GB3228.11/1/14); "SOUTHERN VOICES 2003-2004 Local and Global, Global and Local" on the use of a 2003-4 grant from Christian Aid which in that period matched EU funding (Southern Voices Archive Collection, Box 1, Doc GB3228.11/1/28); "Manchester Neighbourhood Renewal Community chest Final Grant Report Round 3" (Southern Voices Archive Collection, Box 1, Doc GB3228.11/1/30).

Keeping hold of that notion of a flow of ideas and people along well-trodden routes across continents over great distances, it is easy to conceptualise in the current era a similar flow between any number of villages, towns and cities round the globe and the world's top-ranking universities. If a representative image were to be made of this modern-day flow, it would resemble that of the ancient Silk Road. But there is a difference.

Clearly, the major centres of higher education tend to be in what we call Western countries - in the Global North. Comparatively few top institutions are in the Global South. This means that the most talented students from the Global South tend to spend extended periods of time studying in the universities of the Global North. Yet are these universities centres of genuine *mutual* exchange of information, as were the *caravanserais* on the ancient Silk Road? In *caravanserais* travellers paused, exchanged news, made contacts, and negotiated business transactions. All of these imply mutuality.

Returning focus to the Manchester region in the 1990s, it is clear that the area boasted several institutions of higher learning - the Universities of Manchester and Salford, Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), and the University of Manchester Institute of Science & Technology (UMIST). Thousands of students from the Global South passed through these institutions to gain knowledge and qualifications that might improve their own and their communities' lives. Crucially, however, many remained frustrated that there seemed few means of genuinely interacting and sharing their own insights with the host communities. Some joined in the activities of *Southern Voices*, representing as it did a means, however small, of coordinating input from these overseas visitors.

Here was a great opportunity for an exchange of information and views between the general public, academia and Global South citizens. Did the institutions of higher education in the Manchester region take advantage of this golden opportunity? Did Manchester contribute to the creation of a 'Silk Road of Knowledge'?

In the next section I will briefly examine two key periods of interaction between *Southern Voices* and the University of Manchester in particular - firstly, 1990 to 1993 (the period of the group's establishment) and secondly, 2002 to 2005 (focusing on the beginnings of the group's cooperation with The Manchester Museum). In doing so I hope to tease out preliminary answers to the following questions:

- a) How easy was the relationship between *Southern Voices* and the bureaucratic hierarchies of the universities?
- b) Was there ultimately a *mutual* exchange of knowledge?
- c) Were the universities of the Manchester region facilitators or hindrances?

### **3. Examining the relationship between Southern Voices and the University of Manchester**

#### **a) *Period 1990-1993: Establishing an office***

This was a precarious time for *Southern Voices*. The originators were trying to establish what the fledgling organisation was and what it did. The Southern Voices Archive Collection contains minutes of numerous meetings where these subjects were discussed and debated at great length.

However, for the purposes of this paper, I will concentrate on examining the problems *Southern Voices* experienced in finding a venue prepared to host its office.

As we know, *Southern Voices* was originally located on the Didsbury Campus of what became MMU. The Didsbury Campus was some miles from the city centre of Manchester. Once *Southern Voices* became independent, it was decided that it was necessary to find larger premises, and for the nerve centre to be closer to the group's constituency of students. Several options were considered. The most attractive was space in the Post Graduate Society at the University of Manchester just south of the city centre. As well as offering access to Post Graduate Society and Student Union facilities, this choice would be rent and bills free for three years.<sup>6</sup>

The documentation reveals that this move had the "consistent and enthusiastic" backing of key personnel in the Student Union and Postgraduate Society. However, after submitting the proposal to the University Administration, it took fifteen months for a delegation supporting the *Southern Voices* case to secure a meeting with the individual who would decide - the Deputy Registrar of the University. Even though a delegation including high-level Student Union, Postgraduate Society and International Society representation accompanied the *Southern Voices* worker,<sup>7</sup> the desired relocation was turned down.

Reporting on this meeting, *Southern Voices* noted:

"it was clear that the reason why it has taken so long is that the SVP [Southern Voices Project] is seen to cause concern. 'It appears that it will compete with the International Society' and 'be yet another example of the Univ [sic] doing far more for overseas students than the other institutions of higher educ [sic] in Manchester.'" <sup>8</sup>

In 1993 they elaborated further:

"Manchester University Students' Union - have been unable to give us the office space anticipated, due largely to the university bureaucracy and concern about the 'political' nature of Southern Voices." <sup>9</sup>

At the same time, they noted again having the full support of the Student Union and Postgraduate Society, and emphasised working closely with course directors in all four universities in the Manchester area.

So what happened next? Over the years *Southern Voices* did indeed base itself in buildings on the University of Manchester campus on Oxford Road - in an Oxfam premises and St Peter's Chaplaincy, both independent of the University itself.

*Southern Voices* did, then, succeed in achieving a presence on campus, but in spite of the University hierarchy's negative input rather than with its encouragement.

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<sup>6</sup> For details see "Office Base" [c. 1992] (Southern Voices Archive Collection, Box 2, Doc GB3228.11/9/31).

<sup>7</sup> In attendance were the Student Union Manager, Communications Officer, Overseas Student Officer, Post Graduate Committee Chairperson, the *Southern Voices* worker (Celia), and a representative from the University's International Society (Chris Hayes) See *ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>9</sup> "Southern Voices. Interim Report to the European Commission for the period April 1992-March 1993," April 1993 (Southern Voices Archive Collection, Box 1, Doc GB3228.11/1/8).



## b) *Period 2002-2005: Cooperation with The Manchester Museum*

The Manchester Museum is one of the University of Manchester's flagship cultural institutions, located on campus. From 2002 onwards, the Southern Voices Archive Collection records the group's growing involvement with the Museum in two areas. Firstly, the organisation's co-ordinator Jaya Graves served on the Museum's new Community Advisory Panel (CAP).<sup>10</sup> Secondly, *Southern Voices* volunteers and workers collaborated with Museum staff to produce workshops and exhibits centred on objects from the new Living Cultures Gallery - 'Object Lessons' and 'Rekindling Voices'. These were used in outreach to schools as well as for audience development amongst local communities.<sup>11</sup>

What did *Southern Voices* gain from these collaborations? The organisation quite openly explained the purpose of Jaya Graves' participation on the CAP as being, "to influence policy and practice, encouraging a greater understanding of Southern perspectives and readiness to alter programmes in the light of this." Work on outreach and exhibits was viewed to have had a "positive impact on the Museum's practice and their readiness and confidence to explore ways to engage in cross-cultural dialogue with local communities."<sup>12</sup> This fulfilled some of the group's core aims.

How did the Museum see things? The Museum was reacting to a shift in Government agenda towards social inclusion and learning. Funding from the Department of Culture, Media and Sport required evidence of increasing capacity and service improvement. Museums had long been judged on the scope and quality of their collections, but now the yardstick of quality was to be the measurable benefit that PEOPLE derived from the museum - a radical shift. Hence the founding of a CAP in 2001, the recruitment of public programmes and academic development professionals, and a push to engage in audience development and outreach to schools. Hence partnering with *Southern Voices*.<sup>13</sup>

Museum staff genuinely wished to work in partnership with communities, to have a 'democratic exchange', particularly with the CAP. But the then Head of Public Programmes and Academic Development, Bernadette Lynch, later recalled that this exchange had been within subtly delineated parameters. It may have been unintentional, but museum staff were always quietly in control. Potential limitations had not been made explicit to community participants and authority had never been genuinely shared.<sup>14</sup>

Jaya Graves had noted at times in *Southern Voices* reports the frustrations of needing to make 'interventions' at meetings in the Museum. Bernadette Lynch recalled her own gratefulness to Graves "for her graciousness in our on-going 'heated debates'." <sup>15</sup>

Frustrating this interaction may at times have been. But *Southern Voices* had come a long way in being able to raise the voice of the Global South in so august an organisation.

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<sup>10</sup> For example, in "Worker's Report – June 28 2002" the worker (Jaya Graves) mentions The Manchester Museum setting up a Community Advisory Panel on which she would participate, and in "Worker's Report, Oct/Nov 2002", she mentions "Manchester Museum: CAP meetings." (Southern Voices Archive Collection, Box 1, Docs GB3228.11/1/19 and GB3228.11/1/22).

<sup>11</sup> See for example "Manchester Neighbourhood Renewal Community chest Final Grant Report Round 3" op.cit.; "SOUTHERN VOICES 2003-2004 Local and Global, Global and Local" op.cit.

<sup>12</sup> Quotations appear in "SOUTHERN VOICES 2003-2004 Local and Global, Global and Local" and "Manchester Neighbourhood Renewal Community chest Final Grant Report Round 3" ibid.

<sup>13</sup> The reasons for these developments are clear in "The Manchester Museum Annual Report 2002-2003. Reflecting the World at the University of Manchester" (2003).

<sup>14</sup> See LYNCH, Bernadette T. and ALBERTI, Samuel JMM, "Legacies of Prejudice: racism, co-production and radical trust in the museum," *Museum Management & Curatorship* Vol.25 No.1 March 2010, pp13-35.

<sup>15</sup> For Graves's comments see "Worker's Report, Oct/Nov 2002" op.cit. Bernadette Lynch's comment appears in the Acknowledgments section of her article "Collaboration, contestation, and creative conflict. On the efficacy of museum/community partnerships" in MARSTINE, Janet (ed.), *The Routledge Companion to Museum Ethics: Redefining Ethics for the Twenty-First Century Museum* (London: Routledge 2011), p60.

#### **4. Consideration of the questions raised in 2 above and Conclusion**

It is not possible at this stage in my research to give definitive comprehensive answers to the questions raised above which would apply to all the relevant institutions throughout the period under examination. However, on the evidence briefly discussed here, the following tentative suggestions can be made.

##### **a) *How easy was the relationship between Southern Voices and the bureaucratic hierarchies of the universities?***

Looking specifically at the relationship with the University of Manchester, on the one hand, *Southern Voices* had excellent working relationships with parts of the University proper (Students Union, Postgraduate Society, International Society, course directors), and The Manchester Museum genuinely wished to create a mechanism through which the voices of local communities could be heard. On the other hand, the administrative and decision-making structure of the University was suspicious of *Southern Voices*, possibly due to its potential for 'disruption' and 'controversy'. It was too 'political'.<sup>16</sup>

So the relationship between *Southern Voices* and the bureaucratic hierarchy in particular was far from easy.

##### **b) *Was there ultimately a mutual exchange of knowledge?***

*Southern Voices* brought individuals of Southern origin into The Manchester Museum specifically to tell their own stories in their own voices, and Jaya Graves on the CAP was raising her voice to influence policy and practice in one of the most significant cultural institutions in the region. The Museum genuinely wanted community input, so whilst this exchange of knowledge might not have been *equal*, in this instance it was *mutual* in the sense that everyone was listening.

##### **c) *Were the universities of the Manchester region facilitators or hindrances?***

On the one hand, according to *Southern Voices*, the administrative hierarchy of the University of Manchester was neither cooperative nor sympathetic to the group's aims at a crucial juncture which could have spelt its survival or disappearance. In that respect, at least during the earlier period I've explored, it was a hindrance. On the other hand, the course leaders, the Student Union, and the staff of The Manchester Museum were definitely facilitators. All these were also part of the

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<sup>16</sup> On its tenth anniversary, Jaya Graves described *Southern Voices* and its effect as follows, indicating that she understood the disruptive, unsettling aspects of how it intersected with other organisations from which it needed to ask for support (the quotation is from "Introduction," Southern Voices Archive Collection, Box 2, Doc 3228.11/9/29/1).:

"It began in the minds of a handful of people who thought it would be a 'good idea'; a 'project' that many people and networks welcomed until it became a bit vocal and challenging – a 'street child' – as it was described by a colleague from Kenya, hopefully reflecting the ability of the street child to survive as well as mirror aspects of our society which we may not want to see. Projects like SV [*Southern Voices*] are vulnerable for many reasons. They do not easily fit any categories. They need a degree of support but are unwilling to compromise independence..."

University of Manchester in one way or another, so the answer to this question depends on which part of the University is being discussed and which perspective is being taken.

## **Conclusion**

What of our 'Silk Road of Knowledge'? What can we conclude?

*Southern Voices* was a very small organisation with very big dreams. Against the odds it succeeded in creating a pocket of genuine mutual cooperation in Manchester between Southern and Northern voices. Due to the efforts of a few dedicated individuals, genuine exchanges occurred which changed the nature of debate and representation within numerous parts of the University of Manchester and its flagship cultural institution, The Manchester Museum. Whilst the University of Manchester might not have been transformed into a *caravanserai* of old, that does not detract from *Southern Voices*' considerable achievement. Through its efforts, some Southern voices *were* enabled to change perceptions and lives.