



# Student Voices, Expertise, and Welfare Within British Universities in the Mid-Twentieth-Century

*Sarah Crook*

## INTRODUCTION

In 1963 Eric Ashby, then Master of Clare College, Cambridge, rued the lack of knowledge about higher education. Academics, “although dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge”, had “until recently resolutely declined to pursue knowledge about themselves”.<sup>1</sup> Ashby’s concern would soon be addressed, for research about higher education flourished in the 1960s. Some of this work, as I argue here, turned to students as sources of experiential knowledge about their environments. Ashby might have noted, though, that the National Union of Students (NUS) had been investigating and generating knowledge about higher education—via reports aimed at improving provision—since the 1930s. These reports tackled a range of areas of student life, with the first area of investigation being student health facilities. The NUS, I suggest, was one of the “new forums

---

<sup>1</sup> Ashby, Eric. 1963. Introduction: Decision-Making in The Academic World. In *The Sociological Review, Monograph no. 7: Sociological Studies in British University Education*, ed. Paul Halmos, 5–11. Keele: University of Keele, 6.

---

S. Crook (✉)  
Department of History, Swansea University, Swansea, Wales, UK  
e-mail: [s.r.e.crook@swansea.ac.uk](mailto:s.r.e.crook@swansea.ac.uk)

and spaces” that, as the editors of this volume set out, sought to “expand the scope, inclusivity and applicability of welfare services”, and that used its proximity to student life alongside other forms of expertise to develop ideas about how the student community could be best served.<sup>2</sup>

Between the 1930s and the 1970s students’ experiential expertise and knowledge were recognised, leveraged, and applied in ways that would have important implications for universities and higher education institutions. This chapter looks at health and welfare as an area in which students’ experiential expertise was particularly influential and in which the authority of the “student voice” gained early acceptance. It argues that experiential expertise—derived from temporal proximity to studenthood—was valued by student representatives, and that experiential knowledge was fixed upon the wider student community by social science researchers. As the editors of this volume set out, one way of considering holders of experiential expertise is as “individuals whose action and activism has been catalysed and underpinned by their personal experiences and knowledge”.<sup>3</sup>

Within this chapter, I look at some of the products of expertise and one of the mechanisms of the production of this experiential knowledge. The chapter therefore has two strands. Its first strand explores NUS interventions about student health through a series of reports: *Student Health* (1937); *Health and the Student* (1944); *Report on Student Health* (1948); *Survey of Student Health Facilities* (1953). Its second strand looks to sociological investigations of student life as a means by which students were recognised as authorities on their experiences of institutions. This sociological research material played a role in generating experiential knowledge—laying the groundwork for later institutional attempts to gather and curate the “student voice”. I am far from the first to recognise that surveys “create” as well as “measure” reality, and in agreement with these scholars, my argument is that the student surveys developed in the 1960s and 1970s ascribed experiential knowledge to the student body and reflected ideas about this experiential knowledge’s

<sup>2</sup> See [Introduction](#) to this collection.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

value.<sup>4</sup> Thus this chapter examines one route to authority and visibility mobilised by and within the student community, and the other mechanism developed outside the student community.

Students' experiential knowledge differs from some of the other communities discussed in this volume. Students constitute a small percentage of the population at any one time but do not in and of themselves constitute a marginalised group. Put another way, while individual students might be members of oppressed groups—via class, sexual identity, or race (and might be within multiple, overlapping marginalised communities), for example—it is not their status as students that is the vector for this oppression. Instead, experiential knowledge is assumed to flow from students' position within an educational institution. Their experiential knowledge is not just relational but also time-bounded: the perceived bearing of their experience to the academy diminishes as time progresses forward. Generations of students become not experiential experts on student life, but on their moment of student life. Students' experiential knowledge is distinctively temporal. Experiential expertise, then, is tied to a transitory experience of an institution and to the habitus of a highly mutable culture with manifold internal variations.

The groups discussed within this chapter might be seen to hold different types of experiential expertise and knowledge. In 1976 Thomasina Borkman distinguished between experiential knowledge (“truth learned from personal experience”), experiential expertise (“competence or skill in handling or resolving a problem through the use of one's own experience”), and professional knowledge (“developed, applied, and transmitted by an established specialized occupation”). These concepts, Borkman stressed, were not mutually exclusive.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, we can see that NUS reports transgress these boundaries (NUS reports' authors held temporal proximity to student life and the reports were oriented towards addressing problems, but were also grounded in systematic research that moved beyond their authors' experiences—and, of course, leaders of the NUS claimed democratic legitimacy as well as temporal proximity to student life) whereas the surveying of the wider

<sup>4</sup> Armstrong, David. 1983. *Political Anatomy of the Body*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 43.

<sup>5</sup> Borkman, Thomasina. 1976. Experiential Knowledge: A New Concept for the Analysis of Self-Help Groups. *Social Service Review*, 50, 3: 445–456. See also the [Introduction](#) to this collection.

student body about their ability to “fare well” might be seen to be a process of curating experiential knowledge. Whereas the NUS reports on student welfare aimed to establish the national landscape and directly addressed potential reforms, sociological surveys of student views had a more removed relationship with institutional change: they might provide evidence for its need, but it was not necessarily an aim of the research.

Student agency and student life have recently drawn increased scholarly attention.<sup>6</sup> Such a literature takes up Jodi Burkett’s appeal to

reposition students as legitimate historical, and current, actors, as people, not a homogeneous group, who make clear and informed choices about their activities and who are a part of the world in which they inhabit, not just the institution where they study.<sup>7</sup>

The institutions in which students studied and, indeed, students themselves proliferated across this period. In 1946–1947 there were 68,000 full-time university students in Britain; by 1968–1969 there were around 200,000; yet more students were in higher education in non-university institutions. In 1945 there were 21 universities, including five university colleges, whereas by 1970 there were 44. The development of the new universities of the 1960s has been a rich area for scholarly research, as have the campus protests of this period.<sup>8</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Brewis, Georgina. 2014. *A Social History of Student Volunteering: Britain and Beyond, 1880–1980*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1; See Sharp, Emily. 2022. Research perspectives on students in Great Britain and Ireland, 1800–1945, *CLAN-Magazine of History of Universities*, 25: 122–155; See also Burkett, Jodi. ed. 2018. *Students in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–14; Day, Mike. 2012. Dubious Causes of No Interest to Students? The Development of National Union of Students in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Higher Education*, 2, 1: 32–46; Brewis, *A Social History of Student Volunteering*; Laqua, Daniel. 2017. Activism in the Students’ League of Nations’: International Student Politics and the Confédération Internationale des Étudiants, 1919–1939. *The English Historical Review*, 132, 556: 605–637.

<sup>7</sup> Burkett, Jodi. 2018. Introduction: Universities and Students in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland, in *Students in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 1–14, 6–7.

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, Thomas, Nick. 2002. Challenging Myths of the 1960s: The Case of Student Protest in Britain. *Twentieth Century British History*, 13, 3: 277–297; Nehring, Holger. 2020. Challenging the Myths of the Scottish Sixties: Student Protests in the Wake of “1968” at the University of Stirling. *Moving the Social*, 64: 53–80; Pellew, Jill. & Taylor, Miles. eds. 2020. *Utopian Universities: a Global History of the New Campuses of the 1960s*. London: Bloomsbury.

The students of the 1960s—the cohort who were increasingly surveyed about their experiences, as I discuss later in this chapter—were raised in an era in which expectations and structures around “faring well” became more ambitious and far-reaching. In 1948 the World Health Organization defined health as “a state of complete physical, mental and social wellbeing and not merely the absence of disease or infirmity”.<sup>9</sup> At a tangible level, British healthcare structures were transformed by the birth of the National Health Service in 1948: the “cradle to grave” welfare state was born. Young people were agents within as well as beneficiaries of the welfare state. Indeed, Siân Pooley and Jonathan Taylor have recently argued for the centrality of young people to the development and trajectory of welfare services in Britain.<sup>10</sup> Such an argument should be extended to universities, where young people intervened in discussions about institutions’ approaches to their ability to “fare well”.

Keith Vernon has forged important understandings about the rising interest in the health and moral growth of British university students in the decades preceding the Second World War.<sup>11</sup> However, he notes that it is difficult to discern the extent to which students actively solicited health resources, and he concludes that the interest in facilities was top-down rather than student-led.<sup>12</sup> Vernon is right; student voices were just one lever for change. Nonetheless, even if the student voice merely contributed to changes in health provision already in motion, the assertion of their experiential knowledge and expertise foreshadowed some important ways of claims-making that would become increasingly prominent within universities. This chapter looks at student interventions around health and makes two key arguments: that the NUS investigations

<sup>9</sup> WHO Interim Commission, *Official Records of the World Health Organization No. 2: Summary Report on Proceedings, Minutes and Final Acts of the International Health Conference Held in New York From 19 June to 22 July 1946*. Geneva: World Health Organization, 1948.

<sup>10</sup> Pooley, Siân, and Taylor, Jonathan. 2021, Introduction. In *Children’s Experiences of Welfare in Modern Britain*, eds. Pooley, Siân, and Taylor, Jonathan, 1–26. London: University of London Press.

<sup>11</sup> Vernon, Keith. 2000. A Healthy Society for Future Intellectuals: Developing Student Life at Civic Universities. In *Regenerating England: Science, Medicine and Culture in Inter-War Britain*, eds. Christopher Lawrence and Anna-K. Mayer, 179–202. Amsterdam: Rodopi; Vernon, Keith. 2008. The Health and Welfare of University Students in Britain, 1920–1939, *History of Education*, 37: 227–52.

<sup>12</sup> Vernon, Health and Welfare, 250.

into student health provision across this period drew on the authority of representation grounded, in part, in proximity to the experience of student life; and that the sociological surveys of students which flourished in the 1960s and 1970s participated in, and contributed to, a process of knowledge curation that emphasised the value of student views.

## THE NATIONAL UNION OF STUDENTS AND STUDENT HEALTH

The first student unions in the UK developed in Scotland in the late nineteenth century, with England and Wales following soon after. As Mike Day has shown, these early student unions both represented student views and facilitated recreational activities.<sup>13</sup> Before the First World War student organisations met at the annual British Universities Congress, but no formal representative organisation emerged from these meetings.<sup>14</sup> The NUS, founded in 1922, initially brought together 27 universities and colleges and sought to encourage international understanding as well as to represent students. Two years after its foundation every university student union from England and Wales had signed up to the NUS, though it was only in 1937 that membership was opened up to non-university institutions.<sup>15</sup> Its early leaders were predominantly ex-servicemen, reflecting much of the student body in the interwar period.<sup>16</sup> Elected officials were either current students or recent graduates, and it was only in 1949 that the Presidency became a full-time, paid sabbatical position.<sup>17</sup> This

<sup>13</sup> Day, *Dubious Causes*.

<sup>14</sup> Day, Mike. 2012. *National Union of Students, 1922–1912*. London: Regal Press, 13.

<sup>15</sup> Day, Mike. 2017. The National Union of Students and Devolution. In *Students in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland* ed. Burkett, Jodi, 129–154. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan, 131–132. For more on the NUS and international connections, see Burkett, Jodi. 2014. The National Union of Students and Transnational Solidarity, 1958–1968. *European Review of History*, 21, 4: 539–555; Day, *Dubious Causes*, 34; Day, *National Union of Students*, 18. Scotland had a Pre-Existing Body, so the NUS Represented England and Wales.

<sup>16</sup> Brewis, Georgina, Hellowell, Sarah and Laqua, Daniel. 2020. Rebuilding the Universities after the Great War: Ex-Service Students, Scholarships and the Reconstruction of Student Life in England, *History*, 105: 82–106, 83.

<sup>17</sup> Major Stanley Jenkins, student leader—obituary, *The Telegraph*, 26 April 2016 <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/obituaries/2016/04/26/major-stanley-jenkins-student-leader-obituary/>. Accessed 10 July 2024.

proximity to student life implied a value placed on recent experience of student life, even while leaders drew on authority drawn from the democratic process of election. This emphasis on proximity continued across the twentieth century; in 1968, for example, the NUS introduced itself to its new members as a “democratic organisation run *by students for students*”.<sup>18</sup> Its leaders did indeed retain recent links with institutions, and NUS executive teams have tended to be dominated by people in their 20s.<sup>19</sup> The authority of the NUS leadership was, then, conferred by the democratic process of election and by their temporal proximity to studenthood itself.

In the early years of the NUS the organisation saw itself as having a remit that was largely practical.<sup>20</sup> In the 1930s, however, the organisation gained an augmented political consciousness against the background of the depressed economy.<sup>21</sup> It is perhaps not coincidental that the NUS’s first report emerged at this moment of increased politicisation. In 1933 the NUS began work on *Student Health*, its first research report, the results of which were circulated in 1934 before the final report was published by the NUS in December 1937.<sup>22</sup> It began as an investigation into the potential introduction of student health services and health insurance schemes but soon became interested in preventative interventions.<sup>23</sup> The NUS placed significant emphasis on international comparisons. These international comparisons, the report suggested, suggested that universities in Britain were outliers in their relative lack of responsibility for students’ physical and intellectual health.<sup>24</sup> This situation, it acknowledged, was changing as university leaders—although not unanimously—were acknowledging the broader remit of institutional

<sup>18</sup> NUS, *NUS Handbook: Introducing the National Union of Students*, 1968, 3. Emphasis added.

<sup>19</sup> See for example, Beckett, Francis, 1974. *NUS is your Union: an Introduction to the National Union of Students, 1974–1975*. London: NUS, 5–6.

<sup>20</sup> Day, *Dubious Causes*, 34.

<sup>21</sup> Halsey and Marks, *British Student Politics*, 120–121; Simon, Brian. 1987. The Student Movement in England and Wales during the 1930s. *History of Education*, 16, 3: 189–203.

<sup>22</sup> Day, *National Union of Students*, 21.

<sup>23</sup> NUS, *Student Health: The Report of an Enquiry into University Health Services by the National Union of Students*. London: NUS, 1937.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* 6.

responsibilities beyond the provision of games equipment and playing fields.<sup>25</sup>

The report was interested primarily in the physical health of students and was particularly engaged with the provision of physical education resources, although it also explored the availability of university sanatoria and, in the absence of the NHS, insurance schemes.<sup>26</sup> The NUS emphasised the need for plans to be “practicable, economical and efficient”.<sup>27</sup> *Student Health* articulated a “minimum policy” proposal for British universities: a medical examination conducted by qualified medical officers for male and female students; the appointment of a Director of Physical Education at each university; that no university should consider itself “properly equipped” without a gymnasium, a swimming pool, administrative offices for the Director of Physical Education, or private consulting rooms; the extension and maintenance of athletic facilities; and that all universities should provide their students with insurance in case of accident or illness.<sup>28</sup> “Faring well” for students meant facilities to support their physical well-being. Later, the NUS argued that the investigation had been “widely welcomed and saw a great advance in the field of student health”.<sup>29</sup> However, the report’s significance was largely as a means of establishing a baseline of expectations. Six years later the NUS once again formally considered the matter of student health care.

At the start of the 1940s the NUS was becoming more vocal about the need for students to contribute to the administration and decision making within universities. In 1940 it published a *Charter of Student Rights and Responsibilities* that sought to establish this, drawing criticism from commentators sceptical about students’ maturity and therefore aptitude to take up such a role.<sup>30</sup> The issue of representation would gather steam two decades later, though in the intervening years the NUS again turned to health and welfare. In 1943 the NUS, the British

<sup>25</sup> Ibid. 6–7.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid. 9–10.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. 90–96.

<sup>29</sup> NUS: The First Forty Years, 1922–1962, 1962, n/p. MS 280/144/7, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick Library.

<sup>30</sup> Day, Mike, and Dickinson, Jim. 2018. *David Versus Goliath: The Past, Present and Future of Students’ Unions in the UK*, Higher Education Policy Institute (HEPI) no. 111 Oxford: HEPI, 19.

Dental Students' Association, the British Medical Students' Association, and the Scottish National Union of Students came together on the Student Health Committee to attend, once again, to the problems of student health. *Health and the Student* was published in 1944.<sup>31</sup> The pamphlet noted that the available medical inspection regimes and medical insurance schemes did not cover people between 17 and 25 years old and argued that this cohort should "receive more benefit from health services". The health provision that the student organisations suggested in 1944 was formulated around the issues that impinged most pressingly on student health: tuberculosis, eyesight, immunisation, and mental and dental health.<sup>32</sup> These areas notwithstanding, though, the committee recommended that "The ideal health scheme for university students is one which does not interfere with university activity nor impinge unduly on their private lives".<sup>33</sup> The authors were cognisant of the wartime context of the report's publication. The war meant that recreational facilities could not be enhanced; that there was an onus on medical staff to be engaged in "more vital fields" than the "examination and welfare of university students".

The evacuation of some universities rendered this implementation impossible, and, perhaps most significantly, the publication of William Beveridge's report, *Social Insurance and Allied Services* (1942) proposed a significant change to the national healthcare infrastructure. These limitations noted, the student organisations suggested a general direction that the "Student Health Campaign" should take. These included encouraging students to make use of recreational facilities, the provision of a health insurance scheme for students, the medical examination of some students, the identification of students experiencing economic hardship which had deleterious consequences for their health, and the facilitation of health education.<sup>34</sup>

This report of 1944 was perceptive in its acknowledgement that while its recommendations would gain little traction in wartime conditions, post-war Britain would be more amenable to its suggestions. In 1948

<sup>31</sup> BMSA, NUS, BDSA, SNUS. 1944. *Health and the Student* London: I. PAM 61:378.9. Royal College of Physicians of London. London.

<sup>32</sup> *Health and the Student*, 2–4.

<sup>33</sup> *Health and the Student*, 2.

<sup>34</sup> *Health and the Student*, 6–7.

the NUS Student Health Committee issued the *Report on Student Health* that drew upon the results of a circular sent to all the Vice Chancellors and Principals of the colleges within the NUS and that put forward recommendations for the future development of health services and provision.<sup>35</sup> In this report the student representatives were assertive about the challenges facing the student body. “The health of the student is far more undermined by the conditions under which he works—the long hours in buses and trains, the snatched meals, the continuous book work with its attendant eyestrain, and so forth”, they argued. “These conditions tend to produce a sub-normal state of health rather than actual disease, and it is with this... a student health service should deal”. The resulting service should be one that, “looks after every aspect of a student’s life”.<sup>36</sup> Indeed, the recommendations extended beyond the remit of the establishment of a health service. In keeping with the report’s emphasis on the development of “positive health” it suggested provisions relating to catering (“*food* is always a burning question”); lodgings; athletic facilities; and halls of residence.<sup>37</sup> Health and welfare, then, were seen in expansive terms.

In the early 1950s student representatives again turned to health, reflecting that such an investigation was overdue in the light of the changes brought about by the NHS. A questionnaire was sent to all the member colleges. The Grants & Welfare Committee of the Students’ Union at University College Hull—located in a city in the north of England—assessed the replies before submitting a report to the NUS Health Committee.<sup>38</sup> The survey aimed to establish the scale and style of current health provision across different types of institution. The Hull Committee made a series of recommendations around pre-enrolment health checks, the communication between medical officers and student members, positive health education, and the longer-term goal of establishing a health service in all larger institutions. The report, Hull hoped,

<sup>35</sup> This report was initially published in *Focus* in the summer of 1948 and was subsequently reprinted under the title *Report on Student Health: Prepared by the NUS Health Committee and Adopted by the Council of the NUS*.

<sup>36</sup> National Union of Students. 1948. *Report on Student Health*. London: NUS: 3. 7393.aaa.44. British Library, London.

<sup>37</sup> NUS. *Report on Student Health*, 3–5.

<sup>38</sup> National Union of Students. Survey of Student Health Facilities, 1951–1952. 18 June, 1953: 1. NSU/24/95. MSS. 280/91/8, Modern Records Centre, University of Warwick Library.

would encourage students' unions to assess their own health provision. Knowledge about localised provision, then, was being drawn from individual institutions, interpreted at a national level, and then returned to the grassroots, creating a flow of expertise about health services between student representative bodies.<sup>39</sup>

While the impetus for the proliferation of student health services following the Second World War came from a variety of sources, some students considered themselves to have played a role in services' development. In May 1948 the *Palatinate*, the student newspaper at Durham, argued that "action by students" had led to greater interest in student health.<sup>40</sup> The article was not optimistic, however, about the timeliness of the response. Here it was noted that various obstructions meant that it was likely that "we can only... be comforted in our declining years that our grandchildren are well cared for in the bacteria-ridden strife of the academic world".<sup>41</sup> Others shared their sense that students had shaped provision. In Leeds, *Union News* wrote that the student health service (established in 1949) was set up "in large part through the efforts of students themselves".<sup>42</sup>

There is evidence that NUS reports gained a readership among influential student health professionals and an audience within the medical community. *Health and the Student* was considered by the Social and Preventative Medicine Committee of the Royal College of Physicians of London in 1945, and representatives of student bodies were consulted as the Committee put together its Third Interim Report of 1946.<sup>43</sup> The *British Medical Journal* commented in 1951 that since the war "special health services have grown up rapidly in British universities, and student organisations have shown themselves in favour of making physical and radiological examination compulsory for all students".<sup>44</sup> In the 1950s, St Andrews' medical officer claimed that *Health and the Student*

<sup>39</sup> Ibid. 6.

<sup>40</sup> Student Health. 1948. *Palatinate* 2, 12 May: 2.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Health and the Student, *Union News*, 26 September, 1962, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Gibson, Hector James. 1953. Indices of Health and Sickness in University Students: a Study Based on the Work of the Student Health Service of St. Andrews University (in Dundee) During the Years, 1948–1952. Unpublished PhD thesis, University of Edinburgh, 5.

<sup>44</sup> Anon. 1951. Annotations: Student Health. *British Medical Journal*, 2, 4729: 458.

“did a great deal to make known the student point of view”.<sup>45</sup> The NUS’s proposals around mental health were discussed by institutions and supported by organisations that represented educational staff.<sup>46</sup> The NUS did a considerable amount to draw attention to student welfare in its early decades.

Health and welfare remained in view even while the organisation increasingly sought input into student discipline, planning, and academic matters during the febrile 1960s.<sup>47</sup> The NUS explained that student services and welfare continued to be “of major importance” as the organisation took on a more overtly campaigning role.<sup>48</sup> In 1968 the joint statement issued by the Committee of Vice Chancellors and Principals and the NUS agreed that student welfare was one of the key areas for student participation.<sup>49</sup> That students should have an input into health and welfare developments attained greater consensus than other areas in which students battled for representation. However, as has been documented elsewhere, student demands for representation were met with mixed responses. Digby Jacks, President of the NUS from 1971 to 1972, warned that students should not be fobbed off with tokenistic representation.<sup>50</sup>

Medical professionals within universities affirmed the value of conferring with students. Writing about student health services in 1967, Alex Mair, Professor in the Department of Social and Occupational Medicine at the University of Dundee, Scotland, argued that “there is a very real need in British universities to delegate greater responsibility for student affairs to the students themselves”. Universities should, he said, “treat

<sup>45</sup> Gibson, *Indices*, 4.

<sup>46</sup> Institute of Education, *Mental health services for students*. UCE/A/3/7. University College London Special Collections. London.

<sup>47</sup> Ashby, Eric and Anderson, Mary. 1970. *The Rise of the Student Estate in Britain*. London: Macmillan, 115–117.

<sup>48</sup> Randall, John. NUS is your Union, in Beckett, *NUS is your Union*, 3.

<sup>49</sup> Student Participation in Higher Education, HL Deb 23 April 1969 vol 301 cc438-542, 451; Joint Statement from the Committee of Vice-Chancellors and Principals and the National Union of Students, 1968, 3. X.519/40157, British Library, London. The Scottish Union of Students Conducted Separate Discussions with The Leaders Of Scottish Institutions.

<sup>50</sup> Jacks, Digby. 1973. *Student Politics & Higher Education*. London: Lawrence & Wishart, 63.

students as serious, sensible and rational adult beings”.<sup>51</sup> Mair was not alone in arguing for the recognition of students as adults. By the end of the 1960s the *in loco parentis* (“in the place of a parent”) role of universities was increasingly impracticable. The NUS raised students’ concerns with the Latey Committee, which later recommended lowering the age of majority.<sup>52</sup> In the 1960s, then, students were seeking more robust and extensive representation within their institutions and greater recognition of their status.

For prominent educationalist W. Roy Niblett the upheavals of the 1960s had encouraged students to turn to their own experiences as a source of knowledge

‘What can we trust? Whom can we trust?’ These are basic questions for the young in a fluid and permissive society, which changes its standards with the flow of time and as the whirlpools of fashion revolve. ‘We can trust our own experiences’, seems to many the best answer.<sup>53</sup>

Given the emotional, structural, and social changes that were taking place within universities across the 1960s, it should be little surprise that the social sciences—a subject area experiencing significant growth—turned to analyse students.

## SURVEYS, SOCIAL SCIENCE STUDIES, AND SOCIOLOGY

In the 1960s social surveys became another way that the experience of university welfare provision was discerned. Jon Lawrence has argued for the use of historical anthropological and sociological materials to historians, saying their use “makes it possible to write a new type of social history: one in which ordinary people’s thoughts and feelings *at the time*

<sup>51</sup> Mair, Alex. 1967. *Student Health Services in Great Britain and Northern Ireland*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, 169.

<sup>52</sup> Malcolm, David. 2018. “As Much Freedom as is Good for them”—Looking Back at *in Loco Parentis*. Wonkhe. 7 March. <https://wonkhe.com/blogs/much-freedom-good-looking-back-loco-parentis/>. Accessed 1 February 2023; Report of the Committee on the Age of Majority. Cmnd 3342 London: HMRC, 1967.

<sup>53</sup> Niblett, W. Roy. 1974. *Universities Between Two Worlds*. London: University of London Press, 9.

take centre stage—where they become the experts on their own lives”.<sup>54</sup> I argue here that social science played a role in attaching experiential expertise—the expertise on their own lives within the university—to the student. Interest in student views was therefore productive—it helped to produce and to affirm the value of students’ experiential knowledge.

Sociology assumed an increased prominence in the 1960s.<sup>55</sup> As Olive Banks argued, “the sociology of education shared in this boom”.<sup>56</sup> Upon publication the Robbins Report of 1963 (famous for recommending the expansion of university provision) encouraged the collection and analysis of data and information about higher education.<sup>57</sup> However, the founding of the Committee itself served as an important prompt for research. Sociologist Peter Marris’s 1960s study of student experiences was at first conceived of as evidence for the committee, aiming to complement statistics with more discursive, qualitative interviews that allowed students to express their views more freely.<sup>58</sup> Marris underlined the importance of students’ aims, desires, and experiences to understanding higher education, arguing that the “pattern of higher education cannot be decided only by the aspirations of its institutions. It must also take account of the needs which students recognise as personally relevant”. It was, he suggested, “as important to know what the student wants, or can be led to want of his education, as to determine what the institutions of education require of him”.<sup>59</sup> The assumptions, feelings, experiences, and hopes and dreams that students carried with them into institutions came to carry weight. Joan Abbott’s study of social class and student life at the University of Edinburgh began as an undergraduate thesis for an MA Honours Degree in Social Anthropology. This thesis was, she later wrote, developed in response to her own interests as an undergraduate. The book that expanded this early study

<sup>54</sup> Lawrence, Jon. 2019. *Me, Me, Me: The Search for Community in Post-War England*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 6. Emphasis in original.

<sup>55</sup> Savage, Mike. 2010. *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

<sup>56</sup> Banks, Olive. 1982. The Sociology of Education, 1952–1982, *British Journal of Educational Studies*, 30, 1: 20.

<sup>57</sup> Robbins, Lionel. 1963. *Higher Education: Report of the Committee Appointed by the Prime Minister under the Chairmanship of Lord Robbins, 1961–1963* London: HMSO.

<sup>58</sup> Marris, Peter. 1964. *The Experience of Higher Education*. London: Routledge, 2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.* 13–14.

represents a rather particular viewpoint of one who is herself a product of the system which she investigates and whose approach is structured accordingly. The questions asked are of immediate interest to those now passing through the universities, for they are the questions which they are themselves asking. The usual time-lag which takes place between research and changes which have been effected is eliminated, for the changes are taking place now. It is for this very reason that the author undertook her comparative survey immediately after graduating—so that her “student” perspective should not be lost.<sup>60</sup>

For Abbott, temporal proximity to her own experience of studenthood was an advantage to the development of her sociological expertise.

Other social science studies set out to understand students’ emotional and psychological states. Ferdynand Zweig’s 1963 study of students at Manchester and Oxford considered it

essential to probe into the students’ minds and lives, to combine an attitude study with a sociological survey which was aimed not only at the opinions and views of the students but also at their personal and social relations and their community life at large.<sup>61</sup> Zweig called for more research into students’ lives and work, “of which we know practically nothing at present”. He rued The strains and stresses of university life, the emotional problems of university education, the teacher-student and student-student relationships, the health problem of university education, the problem of the social adjustment of students, the personal problems of the students and the influence of parental attitudes, the impact of various systems of examination the optimum work-load—all these subjects are crying out for systematic research.<sup>62</sup>

Zweig’s emphasis on the subjective, the personal, and the individual pushed student experiences to the fore: university planning required not just “new architecture” but also “new sociology”.<sup>63</sup> Others shared his conviction that more research was needed. Ashby, with whom this chapter

<sup>60</sup> Abbott, Joan. 1971. *Student Life in a Class Society*. Oxford: Pergamon Press, xvii.

<sup>61</sup> Zweig, Ferdynand. 1963. *The Student in the Age of Anxiety*. London: Heinemann, xi.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.* 210.

<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*

opened, lamented in the early 1960s that to “make decisions in the British academic world is still to travel largely without maps”.<sup>64</sup>

Zweig and Ashby’s pleas for more research into higher education were soon taken up.<sup>65</sup> Indeed, in 1971 researchers Joan Brothers and Stephen Hatch observed that across the preceding decade

the professional interest of social scientists in various aspects of higher education has developed rapidly. There is wide recognition that the scientific study of the systems of higher education is an essential preliminary to more effective and realistic decision-making, as well as a new awareness of that the college or university environment offers a particularly rich field for the researcher.

Higher education institutions, the authors suggested, provided an ideal location for social scientists to study the interaction between social systems and individuals.<sup>66</sup> This shift towards studying interactions was a part of a broader trend with important implications for the methods that were adopted by researchers. As Olive Banks explained, the emergent sociology

preached an interactionist perspective in which man creates and defines his own social reality. The central task of the sociology of education, therefore, was seen as an examination of the participants in the educational process through an exploration of their perceptions and assumptions as well as their interaction with each other. There was a change in method, most significantly, in the exchange of observation for the social survey, and a change in what were seen as problem areas.<sup>67</sup>

This had significant implications for the locations of expertise. The way to access students’ perceptions and assumptions was to study them,

<sup>64</sup> Ashby, Introduction: Decision-Making in the Academic World, 13.

<sup>65</sup> Carter, M.P. 1968. Report on a Survey of Sociological Research in Britain. *The Sociological Review*, 16, 1: 5–40.

<sup>66</sup> Brothers, Joan and Hatch, Stephen. 1971. A Sociological Approach to Residence. In *Residence and Student Life: a Sociological Inquiry into Residence in Higher Education*, eds. Brothers, Joan and Hatch, Stephen, 7. London: Tavistock Publications. Not all sociological work was welcomed, however, and Brothers and Hatch’s volume was condemned by one reviewer as containing a “poverty of thought on the matter that is common to most educational research”. Kamens, David H. 1974. Review of *Residence and Student Life: a Sociological Inquiry into Residence in Higher Education*, *Social Forces*, 52: 4, 569.

<sup>67</sup> Banks, The sociology of education, 20.

positioning students as experts on their own experience of institutions. Research into students was also prompted by a desire to measure universities' non-academic objectives. One such study was conducted by Marie Oxtoby and Brian M. Smith, who emphasised the need to use social scientific measures to capture information. In 1970 they argued that the nostalgic reflections of alumni were insufficient evidence of the claims made by universities to be agents of change; more rigorous data were needed.<sup>68</sup>

The deepening of research into higher education was enabled by the expansion of scholarly infrastructures: the Society for Research into Higher Education was founded in 1965; research units, chairs, and research fellowships that focused on higher education were established; further dedicated journals were launched.<sup>69</sup> Indeed, the editorial statement that accompanied the first issue of *Research in Education*, published in May 1969, acknowledged the rapid promulgation of sites for research dissemination.<sup>70</sup> These infrastructures communicated, encouraged, and connected social scientific research into higher education. Some of these published works were social surveys that explored students' views and experiences, and in so doing located them as holders of experiential knowledge.

One such social survey into the perception, role, and experience of welfare services among students and staff was conducted at the University of Hull in the early 1970s. This survey draws light towards one of the tasks for this volume. This was to consider “how people *live with* welfare, how they negotiate or reject it”, by revealing how students lived with university services.<sup>71</sup> One full-time Medical Officer was appointed in 1960 at Hull, growing by 1974 to three full-time Medical Officers who worked within a purpose-built health centre alongside nurses, a consultant

<sup>68</sup> Oxtoby, Marie, and Smith, Brian M. 1970. Students Entering Sussex and Essex Universities in 1966: Some Similarities and Differences, II, *Research in Education*, 3, 1: 87–100, 87.

<sup>69</sup> Ashby, Introduction, 6; Aldrich, Richard and Woodin, Tom. 2021. *The UCL Institute of Education: From Training College to Global Institution*, 2nd ed. London: UCL Press, 178.

<sup>70</sup> Anon. 1969. Editorial notes. *Research in Education*, 1, 1: vii.

<sup>71</sup> See [Introduction](#) to this collection.

psychiatrist, and other staff.<sup>72</sup> The university also had a separate Student Counselling Service. It appointed its first full-time counsellor in 1967, in recognition that non-medical problems could endanger academic success and emotional stability.<sup>73</sup>

Indeed, in 1975 the studies' authors, Barry Pashley and Angela Shepherd, noted the consensus among university medical professionals that "a student health unit is not simply an adjunct, but an integral part of the whole educational enterprise".<sup>74</sup> The project distributed postal questionnaires to undergraduate students and academic staff in spring 1974. The questionnaire was sent to one in eight undergraduate students, achieving a 68% response rate, a total of 273 returns. The survey reached 36 pages and was, it apologised, "rather lengthy and bulky", but was predominantly organised in tick boxes, with optional blank spaces to be completed "whenever you consider that your 'ticked' answers require elaboration or qualification".<sup>75</sup> Capturing student views was too important for brevity.

The survey had statements about their level of experience with the student services—including the Student Counselling Services and the university's health service—and respondents were asked to comment on both how important each statement should be and how important it seemed to be. The survey found high levels of awareness of the services among undergraduates. Over 90% of students were aware of the university's health, counselling, careers, and accommodation services. Although there was more variable uptake of these services 67% had used the health service, 9% the counselling services, 40% the careers and 36% the accommodation service.<sup>76</sup> The majority of undergraduates were "very satisfied" (35%) or "fairly satisfied" (39%) with opportunities to access medical advice. However, 52% of students did not know how satisfied they were

<sup>72</sup> Pashley, Barry W. and Shepherd, Angela. 1975. Staff and Student Perceptions of a Student Health Service, *The Journal of the Royal College of General Practitioners*, 25, 160: 845–851, 845.

<sup>73</sup> Pashley, Barry W. and Shepherd, Angela. 1977. Student Health Services: How Educational? *Health Education Journal*, 36, 3: 70–76.

<sup>74</sup> Pashley and Shepherd, Staff and Student Perceptions, 845.

<sup>75</sup> Pashley, Barry W. 1974. Study of Student Personnel and Counselling Services in an English University, Students [computer file]. Colchester, Essex: UK Data Archive[distributor], January 1976. SN: 165, <http://dx.doi.org/10.5255/UKDA-SN-165-1>.

<sup>76</sup> Pashley and Shepherd, Staff and student perceptions, 846.

with opportunities to discuss personal problems (39% were either very or fairly satisfied). Health and counselling services were both seen to be of high importance.<sup>77</sup>

Students were asked about the various tasks for services, showing that undergraduates thought that the provision of psychiatric services should be of at least considerable interest. Respondents also thought students should be offered a general practitioner service, and that services should influence “the University and Departments to modify such arrangements as seem to cause health and emotional problems for students”.<sup>78</sup> It is important that the authors quoted students verbatim, including comments on the purpose of services and how they should shape the whole institution. Such as “I think the doctors should make known to the university authorities the tremendous collective neurosis that afflicts the student body at examination time, and not just accept it as a necessary evil”.<sup>79</sup>

Publications from this research emerged intermittently years after the study concluded, to the concern of the head of the student counselling service at the university.<sup>80</sup> Readers of the *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling* were reassured that the service endured, for “we survive because the students willed us to live”.<sup>81</sup> Student welfare needs and student views—such as those articulated by the NUS earlier in the century—not only laid the ground for provision, but helped to ensure the survival of some of these facilities. In order to make these assertions students needed to have their experiential knowledge recognised.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid. 847.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid. 848.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid. 849.

<sup>80</sup> Pashley, Barry W. and Shepherd, Angela. 1978. How University Members See the Pastoral Role of the Academic. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 6, 1: 1–18; Pashley, Barry W. and Shepherd, A.M. 1975. Student Welfare And Guidance: The Pastoral Role of the Academic. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 3, 1: 31–44; Pashley, Barry W. and Angela Shepherd. 1977. Student Health Services: How Educational? *Health Education Journal*, 36, 3: 70–76.

<sup>81</sup> Friend, Carol. 1978. Correspondence, *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 6, 2: 234.

## CONCLUSION

Health and welfare have been an area of interest for student representative organisations since the 1930s. The importance of student welfare activism was highlighted by the NUS in its celebration of the creation of the Vice President Welfare post, a position first held in 1975–1977.<sup>82</sup> The development of the NUS Welfare post was thus an extension of decades of work on student health and well-being.<sup>83</sup> By the mid-1960s research on how students were faring—and if they were “faring well”—was also being generated, shared, and mobilised by university doctors, social researchers, and sociologists. In this chapter I have considered the expansion of social scientific interest in student health as a mechanism that not just made student views visible, but that cultivated a recognition of students’ experiential knowledge of welfare systems. Discussions about welfare provision were consistently bound up with questions about the broader purposes of higher education, its civic mission, and its role in cultivating the citizens of the future.<sup>84</sup> The NUS reports, and the subsequent turn to broader surveys, highlight students’ stake in these conversations. As I have argued elsewhere, increased anxiety about student mental health in the wake of the Second World War acted as a lightning rod for discussions about students as future leaders and bearers of the promise of the nation.<sup>85</sup>

In the 1970s W. Roy Niblett detected a change of emphasis within higher education. He wrote that the idea that “personal experiences and social values are not as real or in the last resort as important as physical entities, hard facts and verifiable laws” was being challenged.<sup>86</sup> There was a case for knowledge drawn from the experiential and the subjective. As Niblett argued

We can observe and study our experiences; we can detach ourselves from them for particular purposes. But we are dependent upon them as men

<sup>82</sup> NUS, *Winning on Welfare: a Short History Of Welfare Work in the NUS and the Student Movement* NUS, 2012.

<sup>83</sup> Day, *Dubious Causes*, 34.

<sup>84</sup> Vernon, a Healthy Society; Crook, Sarah. 2020. Historicising the Crisis in Undergraduate Mental Health: British Universities and Student Mental Illness, 1944–1968. *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences*, 75, 2: 193–22.

<sup>85</sup> Crook, *Historicising the Crisis*.

<sup>86</sup> Niblett, *Universities Between Two Worlds*, 64–66.

for interest, feeling, perception, individuality. It is impossible to live a life from the outside; to sense, to love, to value, to understand, depend upon capacity at least sometimes to be inside.<sup>87</sup>

Across the 1960s and 1970s the social sciences turned to students' experiences as a means of understanding the changing nature of institutions, and, indeed, young peoples' values. Students came to be acknowledged as holders of experiential knowledge of their environments. This understanding would have significant implications for their institutions. As this chapter has noted, though, student experiential knowledge is distinctively relational and temporal. Looking at the development of student experiential knowledge and expertise helps to complicate our understandings of how expertise is conferred and recognised, and how students have come to be such an intensively surveyed community.

Some academics, however, worried that surveys displaced human relationships. In 1965 sociologist Bryan Wilson ruminated that students "have never been listened to as much as they are today, but the use of elaborate questionnaires and market research techniques may be little more than a publicity gimmick for universities which feel the need to demonstrate their 'progressive' approach". Put another way, treating students as experts by experience had become a performative promotional exercise enabled by the tools of social science. These tools were used to "buy students off": to only superficially engage with them. Instead, he argued that students should be meaningfully consulted on the issues that affected them. Moreover, this should be a "sustained and natural process, reflecting joint concerns, and in the context of shared values; it must itself be an educative process".<sup>88</sup> As we look to our present moment, the challenge to produce sustainable, humane, and deep-rooted relationships within higher education endures.

## SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

Ashby, Eric, and Mary Anderson. 1970. *The Rise of the Student Estate in Britain*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Wilson, Bryan. 1965. The Needs of Students. In *Eighteen Plus: Unity and Diversity in Higher Education* ed. Marjorie Reeves, 44–87, 51–52. London: Faber and Faber.

- Banks, Olive. 1982. The Sociology of Education, 1952–1982. *British Journal of Educational Studies* 30 (1): 18–31.
- Brewis, Georgina. 2014. *A Social History of Student Volunteering: Britain and Beyond, 1880–1980*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Burkett, Jodi, ed. 2018. *Students in Twentieth-Century Britain and Ireland*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Day, Mike. 2012. Dubious Causes of No Interest to Students? The Development of National Union of Students in the United Kingdom. *European Journal of Higher Education* 2 (1): 32–46.
- Pooley, Siân, and Jonathan Taylor, eds. 2021. *Children's Experiences of Welfare in Modern Britain*. London: University of London Press.
- Savage, Mike. 2010. *Identities and Social Change in Britain since 1940: The Politics of Method*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Vernon, Keith. 2000. A Healthy Society for Future Intellectuals: Developing Student Life at Civic Universities. In *Regenerating England: Science, Medicine and Culture in Inter-War Britain*, ed. Christopher Lawrence and Anna-K. Mayer, 179–202. Amsterdam: Rodopi.
- Vernon, Keith. 2008. The Health and Welfare of University Students in Britain, 1920–1939. *History of Education* 37: 227–252.

**Open Access** This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

