

Roundtable: New Research on English Universities in the 19th & 20th Centuries

THE REAL FOUNDERS OF UCL? PUTTING STUDENTS AT THE HEART OF UNIVERSITY HISTORIES

Georgina Brewis (UCL Institute of Education, United Kingdom)

UCL's pioneering foundation in 1826 as the first university in England to admit students regardless of religion is well-known, although its later history is less well researched. However, the place of students in this story has been neglected, as in histories of higher education more broadly. 'No part of the story of the early days of the university is more difficult to recover than that of the life of its students' wrote Hugh Hale Bellot in his centenary history, providing a few paragraphs that largely relied on published biographies and memoirs of eminent alumni. Subsequent work has accepted the narrative that conditions were spartan, hours long, and comforts few, and it has dismissed the corporate life of UCL until reforms in the 1880s and 1890s that led to the creation of one of the first students' unions. However, reading extant official documents with new eyes as well as identifying other contemporaneous sources, such as student diaries and letters, allows us to build up a much richer account of student life in London in the early-to-mid nineteenth century. Such accounts testify to the fact that University College was a stimulating intellectual environment for a new type of student, freed from religious tests and under only limited university supervision, with unparalleled opportunities to invent their own traditions. *Generation UCL: Two Hundred Years of Student Life in London* is a research and engagement project that seeks to turn institutional history upside down and place students and alumni at the heart of UCL's story as the bicentenary of its foundation approaches. It asks us to consider if first students who arrived in 1828 might be seen as the 'real founders' of UCL? This paper offers an overview of the project, with a focus on the methodological approaches and diverse source base required for writing new histories of higher education.

History of Universities Seminar

Convened by Miles Taylor (Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany), Ku-ming (Kevin) Chang (Academia Sinica, Taiwan), Heike Jöns (Loughborough University, United Kingdom) and Tamson Pietsch (University of Technology Sydney, Australia). Hosted by the Humboldt University of Berlin on Zoom: <https://www.histgeog-uni.net/history-of-universities-seminar-2/>.